

# **BUILDING TRAPS FOR GODS**

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# Building Traps for Gods

by [HazelBeka](#)

## Summary

Iruka's life has fallen apart in the year since the kyuubi attack. He spends his days pulling pranks, arguing with his least favourite ANBU, Hound, and becoming more obsessed with teenage jounin Hatake Kakashi for reasons he doesn't entirely understand. Then he starts hearing the stories.

Several orphans have gone missing – branded as runaways by a village still licking its wounds, no one is searching for them. But there are rumours whispered by the village children: rumours of the bogeyman, a shadowy figure who emerges from the underworld, perhaps a man or a monster, with messages from dead parents to lure the orphans back to the Land of the Dead.

Iruka doesn't know what to believe. But the danger is real, the adults aren't listening, and somebody needs to stop the bogeyman. It might as well be him.

# Part I: How the ANBU Got Their Masks

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The cemetery was so crowded that, for the second time in Iruka's memory, the dead had been outnumbered by the living. In the early autumn drizzle, the people in their sombre clothes were as grey and dull as if they had been carved from the same granite as the gravestones that stood among the listening crowd. The difference between them was as fleeting as a run of good luck at the roulette table, and here in the hushed stillness of the morning, even that distinction seemed generous. The living, after all, were only ghosts in the making.

Iruka watched them from his perch in the cherry tree at the very back of the cemetery. As full as the graveyard was, the crowd was clustered close to the memorial stone on the opposite side of the grounds, and the throng of people didn't stretch all the way back, leaving an empty strip of grass separating him from them. From where he sat, he could see Sandaime, just about, beside the memorial, but although his voice was carried by an amplifying seal, from this distance Iruka could only make out the cadence and the sombre tone. The words themselves were absorbed by too many other mourners for there to be any meaning left by the time they reached his ears.

Beside him, Mizuki plucked another cherry from the tree, inspected it for insects and then reached up under the bandana that covered the lower half of his face to pop it into his mouth.

"Where the fuck is Anko?" he asked, turning and lifting the bandana so he could spit the stone with enough force that it hit another branch with an audible smack before falling to the ground.

Iruka shrugged. He'd been wondering the same thing since the ceremony had begun but neither of them had voiced the thought until now.

"Maybe something came up," he said. "A mission or training."

"Today?" Mizuki asked, raising an eyebrow. "A kyuubi orphan given a mission on the anniversary?"

Iruka shrugged again. He turned his gaze back to the crowd of mourners. A lot of them had their faces covered today, either with scarves or bandanas like Mizuki or with masks: the kind that had become a common sight in the year since the kyuubi attack, a thin covering of cloth that fit snugly over the lower half of the face. Perhaps for the occasion, most of them were black.

"She said she'd be here," Mizuki said. He plucked another cherry but didn't eat this one; instead he rolled it between his fingers back and forth. "She wouldn't miss this."

"Maybe she's down there," Iruka said, gesturing to the crowd.

Mizuki gave him that scornful look again. Iruka could feel it trained on the side of his face but he refused to engage, keeping his gaze on the people below.

"How many kids have gone missing now?" Mizuki asked.

"Anko isn't *missing*. We saw her this morning."

"Thirteen. Thirteen kids in the past year. And, you know, it's been a few weeks since the last one. We're due a fourteenth."

This time, Iruka glared at him.

"Shut up. It's only been a few hours, don't be so melodramatic."

Mizuki squeezed the cherry hard enough to crush it, the pulp hanging from the stone.

“Whatever,” he said. “But if she’s skiving for the sake of it, I’ll be pissed.”

If Iruka were honest, he was feeling irritable with Anko too. It wasn’t just *her* parents who were being commemorated. There were sixty-three gravestones with a death date of exactly one year ago today. Iruka knew which stones his parents’ were, even from a distance. He’d been here the day of the funeral, held jointly for all of the victims, although their remains had been cremated over the following week, smoke rising from the burnings all day every day. The air had been thick with the bodies of the dead.

Below, the ceremony seemed to be at an end. Sandaime had stopped speaking and the fringes of the crowd were starting to drift away. Iruka scanned the faces again, searching for Anko, but didn’t expect to see her. If she wasn’t with them, there was no one else she was likely to have come with. He couldn’t see her jounin-sensei amidst the throng of people, or her teammates, although they weren’t really Anko’s friends anymore. Iruka felt the same way about his own teammates, and the other friends he’d had before the night of the kyuubi. The ones who hadn’t lost their parents and been left to pick up the pieces of their lives.

One face in the cemetery caught his eye. A lanky teenager three years older than Iruka stood close to the front of the service, not making any attempt to leave. Sharingan Kakashi wore a mask but then he’d worn one since before it had become widespread. Iruka watched him as the crowd dispersed behind him, but he didn’t move, not even when Sandaime himself spoke to him, the words lost long before Iruka could guess the shape of them.

The branch shook beneath him as Mizuki shifted his weight.

“Come on, let’s go,” he said. “We need to stop off at the market so I can pick up some food for tonight.”

Iruka had already nodded before he realised he had somewhere else to be.

“I can’t. I’ve got to meet Asuka-sensei this afternoon.”

Mizuki scowled at him. “She scheduled a seals class for today? What the hell was she thinking?”

Iruka shrugged uneasily. “I said I’d go. She’ll be pissed if I skip again. And Sandaime-sama will kill me.”

“Yeah because Sandaime cares so much about your education,” Mizuki said, but Iruka was used to the hard edge of resentment whenever the subject came up. “Whatever. Go study your nerd stuff while I take care of all the damn chores. Like always.”

“Get Anko to help you.”

“I would if I could find her. She’ll turn up when food’s on the table and not a second before.”

“Sorry. I’ll help you next time.”

“Whatever.”

He climbed down through the branches and dropped to the ground, sloping off without glancing back. Iruka watched him go, feeling a twinge of guilt. He should have said he’d skip the tutorial. He didn’t feel like studying today anyway. Didn’t feel like doing anything or seeing anyone. He’d expected today to cut him deep, had been preparing himself for weeks, but now the anniversary was here he felt no more capable of pain than the memorial stone. Maybe that should worry him, that he could feel nothing except a bone-deep exhaustion, but he didn’t have enough energy to care.

The cemetery slowly emptied out. Iruka sat in the tree, the drizzle dampening his hair and collecting on his skin enough that drops started to form, clinging until the weight gave in to gravity and trickled down his arm. He barely noticed. Kakashi hadn’t moved either. He was still standing near the stones engraved with the names of the dead. Who had he lost? It struck Iruka as suddenly



wrong that they were strangers. That they had each lost people to the same monster and didn't know the names of the other's dead. Kakashi didn't know his name either, didn't know that he existed. Iruka hated that. He hated that he was one more ghost in a town full of spectres.

He stood up on the branch and stared fiercely down at the cemetery one last time, then let himself drop, landing hard and enjoying the thwack of the earth against his ribs as he rolled and sprang up. Suddenly he had the urge to run. It wasn't energy, not exactly, but a swelling under his skin, a force building up inside him that had to be released before it tore him apart. Iruka whooped loudly, an inappropriately cheerful sound that gained him shocked looks from the few people still close by. He stuck his tongue out at them and raced through the cemetery, revelling in the disapproving gazes. In being *seen*.

But not by everyone. He glanced back as he reached the cemetery entrance, making sure all eyes were on him. Most were, except one pair. Sharingan Kakashi hadn't looked up even once.

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In the end, Iruka didn't go to his tutorial. He made it halfway there before his feet turned down an alleyway almost of their own accord, veering away from Asuka's neighbourhood and back towards the centre of the village. He needed noise and the press of bodies around him, even if they were strangers, though more people recognised his face these days. Shinobi he'd never spoken to eyed him warily, knowing him by reputation and making a point of looking out for him, the better to avoid falling victim to one of his pranks.

Iruka shoved his hands into his pockets and sloped through the streets, keeping a low profile for once, the better to avoid Mizuki. He felt a pang of guilt, but he didn't feel like doing chores right now. The

memorial ceremony had made him restless and he needed to work off the excess energy somehow. He could find one of his teammates or his jounin-sensei and go spar; the idea of being smacked around held a certain appeal. He wasn't the best at taijutsu, was too fiery and lost his focus, but it felt good to strike hard flesh with his fists and to feel the whip-crack of a blow to the face in return.

But he doubted anyone would want to train with him today. It would be 'inappropriate', like so many of the things that made him feel alive. Well, never mind. He had other options. The whole village was both his punching bag and playground.

He was wandering through the alleyways skirting the market when he noticed Kakashi again. The older boy was on the main street but sticking to the edges, hunched over and walking quickly as though he didn't want to be seen. If it had been anyone else, Iruka would have thought they were being suspiciously furtive, but Kakashi always moved through the village that way. It was part of the reason why he fascinated Iruka. Here was a boy who had all eyes on him without even trying and he wanted to hide from them. It was unfathomable.

Latching onto this new distraction, Iruka fell into step some way behind him, not even trying to hide the fact that they were walking the same way. So what if they were? Kakashi was headed along one of the busiest streets in Konoha, he wouldn't think anything of it even if he noticed Iruka trailing him – not that he would. Iruka had followed Kakashi through town more times than he could count and Kakashi had never so much as glanced at him.

Kakashi hesitated by a stall selling masks, and Iruka slowed too. The stall had a large banner hung over it telling customers to 'cover your face and stay safe!' The owner was in deep conversation with a man holding a baby on his hip, and Iruka drifted closer, considering pinching one of the masks for Mizuki. But then Kakashi started moving again and Iruka had to hurry or lose him in the crowd.

As he followed, Iruka found himself compensating for Kakashi's reticence by making himself more visible. He straightened his spine, threw back his shoulders and lifted his head. Instead of giving the other pedestrians a wide berth, he barged through the middle of groups, knocked his elbows against the slower walkers he passed, and even flipped off one of the market stall owners he'd been caught stealing from last month, which prompted a litany of abuse that drew half the eyes on the street.

Not Kakashi's.

By the time they reached the main square, Iruka was downright pissed off. He wasn't sure at what point the game had changed from stalking to attention-seeking but by winning one he was losing the other, and he was starting to fantasise about taking drastic action. Running right up to Kakashi and grabbing his shoulders, *making* him look. Yelling his name into Kakashi's face, and saying things so awful that Kakashi would think about them for the rest of the day, would never forget Iruka for as long as he lived.

Before he could act on any of those impulses, Kakashi slipped suddenly into a doorway in the Hokage Tower. Not the main entrance, of course – Kakashi avoided those as much as possible – but one of the side entrances usually used by the clerks, cleaners and other staff. Iruka growled low in frustration, kicking an empty can, which clattered across the street and almost hit a passer-by in the leg.

That was that game over with. Whatever Kakashi was doing in there, Iruka wasn't about to follow him. He'd been banned from the Tower for the next week, and he knew there'd be an ANBU guard already watching him, ready to swoop down and take him home if he tried to walk into the building. Not that Iruka cared about getting in trouble with ANBU, but they'd tell Sandaime and he'd hated the disappointed way Sandaime had looked at him when he'd earned the ban. He wasn't ready to see that look again just yet.

It was still early in the afternoon. Iruka's stomach growled and he rolled his eyes. He was going through a growth spurt and constantly ravenous. Mizuki kept complaining about the increase in their food bill, as if Iruka could help it. Well, fine, he'd go buy some lunch and then he'd find some way to occupy himself. Asuka-sensei had taught him a new seal last week that he'd been itching to practise ever since.

Half an hour later, Iruka was engaged in setting up a trap in an alleyway not far from the Hokage Tower. There was nothing special about this particular alleyway to the untrained eye, and to an outside observer it would have seemed an odd choice if Iruka planned to catch anyone. It didn't lead anywhere, snaking behind a couple of shops and providing a place for the bins and fire escapes, nothing more. But in the past year Iruka had spent a lot of time observing things that most people – even highly trained shinobi – didn't bother to observe, and he knew that for a certain kind of victim, this was prime trapping ground.

Of all the things Iruka noticed about the village, ANBU patrols were his speciality. They were never one hundred percent predictable, and were changed every couple of weeks – although Iruka suspected there was a pattern to it that he had yet to figure out – but the ANBU operatives themselves had a few ingrained habits that Iruka had catalogued and exploited for a while. They preferred to patrol from the rooftops, to give them the best view of the streets below, but, Iruka had noticed, they didn't like to be observed climbing up and down from their perches. Weeks of stalking the patrols through the village had proved that dead-end alleyways were their preferred means of climbing from one level to another, and Iruka had spotted three different ANBU using this alley in particular in the past month alone. It was close to the Tower, and the rooftop directly above had a good view of two of the busy shopping streets. Iruka didn't know exactly when the next ANBU would come through here, but statistically speaking he probably had a good couple of hours at least. Not that he needed them.

The trap he had devised was simple, but if all went to plan it would be effective *because* of its simplicity. That was something Asuka-sensei had impressed on him many times: two or three simple steps working together often produced better results than a complicated one-step trap. And so Iruka had worked backwards, throwing things together as they occurred to him.

He'd started by laying down the base layer of his trap: priming three spiderweb seals with just enough chakra that he could activate them with a single hand sign from close by but without making them detectable. The spiderweb seals were Asuka-sensei's own design, and it had taken a lot of persuading before she'd taught him this particular trick. Once activated, they would make a surface stick to any chakra signature that touched it, and their reach was wide enough that Iruka had trapped a good portion of the alley floor as well as two of the walls.

Of course, there was always a chance that his intended victim wouldn't step in quite the right place, so Iruka had added a second part to the trap: a set up on the fire escape that involved several shuriken rigged to a low level explosive tag that would shoot projectiles into the alleyway, forcing any potential victim to dodge. The downside of this particular trap was that it was hard to aim the shuriken, making it less reliable and more dangerous than other methods, but Iruka was working with the tools he had to hand, and besides, he wasn't setting up a trigger trap that would go off for anyone who walked by. The last time he'd set up a trigger trap had been the one and only time Sandaime had shouted at him, and since then Iruka hadn't dared attempt another one. No, this trap would only go off when he set it off, and if ANBU couldn't handle a few wild shuriken, well, they probably deserved a scratch or two.

Still, there was probably a way to gain some accuracy, perhaps by weighting the shuriken or adjusting their proximity to the tag. Iruka had done some experiments on this subject, but it was a work in progress, and he was hunched on the fire escape wrapped up in

making minor adjustments when he heard a footstep on the stairway behind him and whirled around.

An ANBU stood on the stairwell, barely six feet from him, a hand on one hip and his body language thoroughly unimpressed. Iruka felt his cheeks flood with colour, mortified that the ANBU had got so close without him noticing. That was downright shameful. He should have set up some alarms at the perimeter to alert him if anyone got close, but he'd thought he'd have hours to play with. Goddamn.

And of all the ANBU to catch him in the act, it had to be Hound. Of course. Most of the ANBU in Konoha were familiar with Iruka by now, and the most common reaction he got was a mixture of amusement and exasperation, but Hound was different. He was at best patronising and at worst dismissive. Iruka hated him even more than the ANBU who got angry with him.

"You know the drill," Hound said. He sounded positively bored. "Take it apart. Go on."

Iruka flushed even hotter, with anger now rather than embarrassment.

"Make me," he said, turning back to his shuriken and carrying on with his adjustments, shoulders tensed in case Hound really did try to make him.

But no. There was no hand on his shoulder to pull him away, no human contact at all. Instead, Hound just sighed and spoke again.

"Don't waste my time," he said. "I have better things to do. It's not like you're going to catch anyone now, is it?"

"If you fuck off then I still might."

Hound didn't respond, and after a moment of silence Iruka glanced around to find him leaning against the side of the fire escape and watching him. Waiting with the patience of glaciers for him to obey.

Iruka knew from experience that Hound couldn't be riled, but he couldn't help but try.

"Stand there and watch if you want. You don't run this town. I can do what I like."

"Take it apart," Hound said again. He sounded like the world's weariest babysitter.

"I said make me!"

"You're really not worth the effort."

Iruka's fingers had already been trembling on the shuriken, poking them around for the show of it now rather than with any intent, and on sudden impulse he grabbed one, a spike piercing the tender flesh between forefinger and thumb, and hurled it towards Hound. The shot was embarrassingly wide, but Hound reached out and deftly plucked it from the air, then pocketed it, all with that lazy slouch that irritated Iruka so much.

"Good," he said. "Now get rid of the others."

Iruka was sorely tempted to throw another one. To throw *all* of them if he had to, just to see Hound lose his cool. What would Hound do if Iruka attacked him for real? Iruka wasn't arrogant enough to think he could beat an ANBU – not in a direct confrontation anyway, his traps were another matter – but would it at least piss Hound off enough to make him show some emotion for once?

Before he could lose his temper completely, there were footsteps on the fire escape, this time from above. Iruka turned in time to see a second ANBU coming down towards them, making no effort to hide his presence. Iruka knew this mask too: Eagle. He had a slim build and messy dark hair, and Iruka suspected he might be an Uchiha. He took one look at the situation and then hopped down from the stairs and came over to Iruka.

“Another project, huh?” he asked. “Looks like you got busted.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Iruka grumbled, his fury receding to irritation.

Eagle inspected the shuriken and exploding tag and hummed appreciatively.

“This looks like a distraction to me. Where’s the real trap, huh?”

“That would be telling.”

“Aw come on, I’m curious! What were you planning to do after you skewered me? Or is this stage two?”

“Stop encouraging him,” Hound said flatly. “Iruka, take it apart and go home.”

Iruka flipped him off without turning away from Eagle.

“Why don’t you head off, Hound?” Eagle suggested. “I’ll take it from here. I’m sure you have things to do, places to be.”

“You’ll baby him,” Hound said. “You shouldn’t humour him. He’s only doing it for the attention.”

Iruka whirled around.

“Don’t talk about me like I’m not here,” he snapped. “If you don’t want to ‘humour me’ then why don’t you fuck off?”

Hound shrugged.

“All right,” he said. “I do have better things to do.”

And without another word he walked past Iruka and went up the stairs. Iruka bit his tongue so he wouldn’t shout rude words after him.

“Don’t mind him,” Eagle said. “He’s especially grumpy today.” He idly poked at one of Iruka’s shuriken. “You seem a little more on edge



than usual too.”

“I hate that guy,” Iruka muttered.

Eagle nodded. “Were you at the ceremony this morning?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Me too,” Eagle said. “It’s been a tough day all round, huh?”

Iruka scowled at the metal beneath his feet. There was a patch of rust near his right heel and he scuffed at it with his shoe.

“I don’t need you to feel sorry for me,” he said.

“I’m sure you don’t,” Eagle agreed. “You’ve got Mizuki and Anko looking out for you, right? And your senseis and teammates. Are you guys all taking good care of each other?”

Iruka made a noncommittal sound.

“If there’s anything you ever need, don’t be afraid to ask for it,” Eagle continued. “I know times are hard right now and everyone’s still picking up the pieces, but if you need anything —”

“Hey, Eagle?” Iruka interrupted. He’d heard this spiel before from several of the nicer ANBU. Maybe they meant it, maybe they didn’t, but he couldn’t stand hearing the pity anymore. “Is it true what they say about ANBU? About why you guys wear masks?”

There was a moment of silence while Eagle switched gears.

“Oh, that’s an old story,” he said. “You ever heard the version we tell in ANBU?”

“I don’t think so.”

Eagle sat down on the stairs, shifting a little to make himself comfortable, and Iruka drifted closer.

“You know Konoha was created after a time of war between the Senju and Uchiha clans,” Eagle said. “Back in those days a lot of shinobi were sent to their deaths. Eventually, they’d almost run out of adults and had to recruit younger and younger children to fight and die on the battlefield. It was a time of blood and darkness. Eventually, even the men and women who’d started the war became worn down by the sight of children being slaughtered.”

Eagle hesitated and looked up at Iruka. “This isn’t too dark for you?”

“I’ve seen darker.”

“Of course.” Eagle gave him another of those pitying looks, his black eyes sad through the holes of his mask, but then carried on.

“To end the war, the clans came together and decided to create a new shinobi village as a truce. And it worked, in a way. The war came to an end, but suddenly enemies were living side by side, and the friction didn’t vanish just because their leaders had come to an agreement. Can you imagine, Iruka, if the man who’d killed your brother was suddenly your teammate? Or if the woman who’d crippled you moved into the house next door? It was not an easy time. There were grudges simmering under the surface, and the Shodaime, the first hokage, knew it was only a matter of time before it boiled over into violence again.”

“So he made ANBU,” Iruka said.

“So he made ANBU,” Eagle agreed. “A few elite shinobi who could keep everyone in line. ANBU didn’t wear masks back then. The Shodaime thought it was best for the villagers to see the most powerful members of the clans working together, so it was well-known who was an operative. And it worked, for a while.” He rested his elbows on his knees and leaned forwards. “But this is the part where the story goes down a slightly different route from what you learnt in school.”

Iruka leaned against the railing, and Eagle glanced behind him at the trap close to his back.

“Careful of that tag, Iruka.”

“I know it’s there. Go on.”

“During the war, Death had been busy ferrying Uchiha and Senju souls alike to the Land of the Dead,” Eagle continued. “His cities were full of new denizens, but he was greedy for more. When the fighting dried up, so did his supply of new souls, and he decided things couldn’t stay that way. So he came up with a plan to break apart the village and plunge Konoha into civil war. He met with Uchiha Madara, one of the founders, and told him that he brought a gift from his brother who’d died at the hands of the Senju.”

“What kind of gift?”

“One of Death’s demons from the underworld. The nine-tailed fox.”

Iruka caught his breath. Eagle was watching him closely, but after a pause he carried on.

“I’m sure you remember from history class what happened next. Madara used the kyuubi to try to overthrow Senju Hashirama. It’s said that Death arrived on the battlefield at the end of the fight. He looked between them and decided he would only take one. He was greedy but he was smart, and he knew that leaving one alive would fuel hatred of the victor in the losing clan, and that hatred would lead to generations of war in the future.”

“Why did Death choose Madara?” Iruka asked.

“Because of his eyes,” Eagle said. “He wanted those cursed Sharingan eyes. And so he wrote Madara’s name in his ledger, and Madara sighed his final breath. But before Death took his soul away, he turned to Hashirama and told him: you may rule your village in daylight but know that I am the king in the shadows. If you don’t pay

me my tithes, I will choose the strongest of your soldiers and take them for my own.

“But the Shodaime was just as cunning as Death, and once he’d returned to the village he ordered that the strongest shinobi, the ANBU, would hide their identities. And so they called themselves after animals and they wore masks to hide their faces, and when Death next visited the village he found his plans thwarted because he couldn’t recognise a single one of the strongest shinobi. And so to this day, ANBU have worn masks so that Death won’t know us when he comes calling in the night.”

Iruka let that sink in. During the story, he’d blocked out the noises of the street but now the footsteps and voices of people walking past the alleyway crept back into his consciousness. He half turned, and felt the brush of a shuriken against his arm.

“Careful,” Eagle said sharply. He stood up and nudged Iruka gently away from the trap. “I might be protected from death but you certainly aren’t.”

“It’s just a story though, isn’t it?” Iruka said. “I mean, all that stuff about Death isn’t *true*.”

Eagle hummed. “Who knows?” he said. “The idea of hiding from Death has certainly caught on recently. All those people covering their faces. I’ve noticed that you never wear a mask.”

“I’ve already survived the kyuubi,” Iruka said. He jammed his hands into his pockets. “What’s the point in hiding now?” He thought about Anko suddenly and his bravado faded. “Although…”

“Yes?”

“Eagle, do you know what’s happened to those missing kids?”

There was a beat of silence.

“Which missing kids?”

Iruka looked up at him, surprised.

“All those kids who’ve vanished since the kyuubi attacked.”

“You mean the runaways?”

Iruka stared at him.

“They didn’t *run away*,” he said. “They were *taken*. Everyone says so.”

“Oh yeah? Who by?”

“The bogeyman.”

He knew as soon as he’d said it that it was the wrong answer. It came out sounding childish and small, like he was a kid afraid of the dark, and he could tell by Eagle’s hesitation that he was working out a diplomatic way to answer.

“I mean, that’s what we call him,” Iruka clarified. “No one’s ever *seen* him, but he’s real.”

Eagle made a carefully neutral sound and took a step closer, laying a hand on Iruka’s shoulder.

“You know, Iruka,” he started, each word chosen slowly, “the last year has been a scary time for everyone. People don’t feel safe in the village anymore. Some people have decided it’s too scary, and they’ve left. Sometimes they don’t tell anyone, they just pack up and leave.”

Iruka shrugged off his hand.

“Forget it,” he said.

“A lot of rumours have been going around and I know it can be confusing...”

“I said forget it!” Iruka grabbed up a handful of shuriken, a few of them falling with a metallic clatter onto the floor of the fire escape, one rolling off the edge and down to the alley below.

“Iruka...”

But Iruka was done here. He'd been stupid to think that a grown-up would listen, especially ANBU. They had their pretty stories about escaping death and protecting children, but they didn't care about kids any more now than in the time of the warring states. Iruka had learnt that the hard way. They all had.

He threw a parting shot over his shoulder.

“Like you guys care what happens to us. We're just looking for attention, right?”

And then he fled down the fire escape, running so hard that the metal shook beneath his feet. Eagle didn't follow him. Of course he didn't. For all that he feigned sincerity, his words were no more honest than the mask that concealed his face.

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The sun was low in the sky by the time Iruka made it home. The dog down the street was barking incessantly again, and there was a group of teenagers lurking on the street corner who Iruka studiously avoided making eye contact with, hunching his shoulders and speeding up until the front door of the apartment block closed behind him. There was a lift in the building but it hadn't worked since before Iruka had moved in, and so he trudged up the five flights of stairs,

wrinkling his nose at the smell of piss and cigarette smoke, and then let himself into the flat.

Mizuki was already home. Iruka knew it was him because there was the sound of clattering coming from the kitchenette. Mizuki was the only one of them who bothered to cook. Iruka glanced at the other shoes in the genkan as he toed off his own. Mizuki's were lined up in a neat row and a few of Anko's were strewn more haphazardly around. Her pair of black trainers were missing, and Iruka frowned as he slouched his way through into the kitchen.

"Where's Anko?" he asked as he stepped inside.

Mizuki was frying something in the wok that made Iruka's mouth water. He hadn't eaten since lunch, and that had only been a few measly dumplings. He gravitated over to Mizuki's side to peer into the pan, and was gratified to see that there was enough to feed all three of them, although he felt bad that Mizuki had once again been saddled with the task of taking care of them.

"How the hell should I know?" Mizuki asked.

He scowled at Iruka and stirred the meat and vegetables more vigorously, a piece of carrot flying out of the pan. Iruka scooped it up from the stove, almost burning his fingers, and popped it into his mouth.

"You still haven't seen her?" he asked.

"Not since breakfast." Mizuki glanced at him and raised an eyebrow. "You don't really think the bogeyman got her, do you? I was just trying to scare you. Lighten up."

Iruka looked away. "He got Takeo. And Hina."

"Anko's too important to get stolen away," Mizuki said, his voice dripping with disdain. "With her hotshot jounin-sensei and all. She's

probably training with him now. He's not the type to take a day off for a mere day of mourning."

"She said she'd be there for the ceremony and she never showed."

"Anko's a flake. Since when are her promises worth a damn?"

He turned off the burner and gave Iruka a meaningful stare until he took three chipped plates out of the cupboard. Mizuki raised an eyebrow but served the food onto all three.

"Don't get your knickers in a twist," he said. "She'll turn up when she's good and ready. You'll see."

They carried their plates through into the lounge and sat together on the sofa, an old ragged thing that smelt of mildew, manoeuvring their elbows around each other as they ate in the cramped space. Iruka shovelled his food down while it was still too hot and burnt his tongue, but he was too ravenous to care.

Neither of them spoke while they ate, too focused on the food, but once Iruka had finished he put his plate down on the floor and turned sideways on the couch, crossing his legs under him.

"Where do you think they go?" he asked.

"Who?"

"The missing kids. Where do you think he takes them?"

"How should I know?"

"You always know stuff," Iruka said, leaning forwards. Mizuki finished his own food and piled his plate neatly on top of Iruka's. "What are people saying? Someone must know *something*."

"Well, sure," Mizuki said. "Those missing kids know. The bogeyman knows." He had that smug expression on his face that meant he did know something but he wanted to draw out the suspense.



“Come *on*, Mizuki,” Iruka whined. He leaned even further into Mizuki’s space, but Mizuki was unbothered.

“Do the washing up and I’ll tell you.”

Iruka glanced towards the kitchenette. The only advantage of having such a tiny kitchen space was that they didn’t have room for more than three plates, two pans, and one chopping board. That was the sum total of their equipment, and although Mizuki had used most of it, it wouldn’t take long to clean. It didn’t mean Iruka was any more enthusiastic about doing it, but Mizuki had cooked and Anko was still missing in action so he couldn’t really refuse.

“Fine,” he sighed, scooping up the plates and carrying them over to the sink, dumping them into the bowl and turning on the taps.

Mizuki followed him, leaning against the wall behind Iruka so as not to get in the way. He waited while Iruka ran the water, and once the gush had subsided and Iruka had started scrubbing, he finally spoke.

“The bogeyman comes in daylight,” he said. “When a kid is all alone in an empty street, feeling safe because the sun is high in the sky, the bogeyman is waiting. He comes out of the shadows with an outstretched hand and says, come with me.”

“How would anyone know what he says?” Iruka asked.

“Because he doesn’t always manage to take the kids away,” Mizuki said. He had a good voice for stories. A calm, almost hypnotic cadence, so different from the way he usually bitched and swore. “One or two have met him and escaped. I heard it from Hayate, and he heard it from one of the orphanage brats. There was a girl the bogeyman tried to snatch last week. You hear about it?”

“No. Tell me.”

“It happened last Tuesday afternoon. The girl was at school; her class was outside on the field practising shuriken throws. She was

bad at weapons training and hated that class, and since it was so chaotic anyway she decided to slink off when the teacher wasn't looking. Not far, just into the trees at the back of the field. You remember them?"

Iruka did. There was a cluster of five or six elms at the edge of the school field, good for climbing, and providing a welcome patch of shade on sunny days. Beyond them lay the metal fence that fringed the Academy grounds, easy to scale but there for the look of the thing: to mark the boundary more than enforce it.

"She made it over to the trees," Mizuki continued. "No one even noticed she'd gone. She decided to climb one, thought about jumping down the other side of the fence and skipping the final class of the day. She was sitting on one of the branches, weighing up whether it was worth running off in her gym clothes, when she noticed him. At first, it was just the feeling of being watched. That cold fingers on the back of your neck sensation. She looked hard at the street, at the windows of the houses across the road, the bushes in the front gardens, but everything looked empty. And then a movement flickered in the corner of her eye and she looked down to find a man standing at the base of the tree, looking up at her."

Iruka's hands stilled on the plate he was washing.

"A man?"

"Were you expecting a monster?" Mizuki asked, a thread of amusement in his voice.

"Monsters exist," Iruka said. "One killed your parents. And mine."

Mizuki didn't have a sarcastic retort for that.

"He took the shape of a man," he continued, "but afterwards she couldn't say what he looked like, only what he felt like. There was an unexpected sense of cold, like stepping out of a stuffy house into the evening, only the outside air has cooled much faster than the inside,

and although it's only a little chilly, your arms go pebbly with goose bumps. Maybe you're right, Iruka. Maybe he wasn't a man. Either way, he was the bogeyman."

Iruka was barely washing up now, just holding the plate under the water and listening.

"Is this true?" he asked.

"She says it's true," Mizuki said. "But I can't read her mind. I'm just telling you the story she told everyone else. Do you want to hear the rest or not?"

"Yeah, go on."

"Because if you don't believe me then I have better things to do than tell you bedtime stories."

"I said go on!"

Mizuki left just enough of a pause that Iruka started jigging with impatience, and then he relented and continued.

"The girl asked where the bogeyman had come from. She wasn't frightened yet, but she was uneasy. No one should have been on the school grounds except the students and teachers, but although he was strange, he didn't act like he wanted to hurt her. He didn't have a weapon, and he was smiling.

"I have a message from your mother, he said. She sent me to tell you something.

"But the girl knew this couldn't be true. After all, her mother was dead."

Iruka swallowed thickly.

"The kyuubi?" he asked.

“That’s right. So the girl called the bogeyman a liar. She told him she’d scream if he didn’t leave her alone, but the bogeyman was still smiling. A smug little smile, because he knew something she didn’t.

“Your mother wanted to know, he said, if you still have the doll she made you. The one with the red hair and the green dress. You called her Akari-chan.

“That brought the girl up short. Because she knew exactly which doll the bogeyman meant.

“How do you know about Akari-chan? she asked.

“Your mother told me, the bogeyman said. When we met in the Land of the Dead.”

“Wait, what?” Iruka interrupted, and this time he turned around fully, abandoning the dishes to the sink. His hands dripped soap suds over his feet, but he barely noticed. “The Land of the Dead? What are you talking about? You said this story was true!”

Mizuki scowled at him. “I said I’m telling you the version that was told to me.”

“Yeah right. You’re making shit up. There’s no such place as the Land of the Dead.”

“Sure there is.” There was an edge of defensiveness in Mizuki’s tone now. “Where do you think the kyuubi came from?”

Iruka blinked at him. “But that’s just a story.”

“It had to come from somewhere,” Mizuki snapped. “And it’s a *demon fox*, moron. Where do demons live? The underworld. Where do the souls of the dead go? *The underworld*. And what’s to say there aren’t other monsters down there too, huh? You’re the one who kept bitching about monsters being real. Yeah they are, and they

have to live somewhere. Did you think they were all hiding out in your closet?”

It wasn't the first time Iruka had heard the word 'underworld' thrown around. It was the land where summons lived when their shinobi didn't need them, the land where the dead walked alongside gods. He'd grown up with these stories and never questioned them, but now he had to consider a third element – the bogeyman and his missing children – and it suddenly seemed too large to swallow.

“So you're saying the bogeyman is a monster like the kyuubi,” he said. “Some kind of demon who's come up from the underworld to – what? Chow down on kids?”

“I didn't say anything,” Mizuki snapped. “Because you so rudely interrupted. If you don't want the end of the story then fine, make up your own ending. But don't come crying to me when the bogeyman comes for you. He will, you know,” he added viciously. “You're always running around alone with your face uncovered. He's going to see you. He's going to *get* you, Iruka, just like he got Anko.”

There was a moment of shocked silence. Mizuki seemed to realise he'd gone too far because he looked away, his neck turning pink, and crossed his arms tightly over his chest. Iruka's hands were still dripping onto the floor, the soft pat pat the only sound.

“Do you think the bogeyman really got her?” he asked.

“I don't know.”

“I asked ANBU about it today. They don't care. Eagle said they're all runaways.”

“Of course that's what they'd say,” Mizuki said. “It's easier that way, isn't it? They won't help us, Iruka. The adults in this town don't give a shit about us.”

“So what should we do if Anko's really gone?”

Mizuki glanced back at him. "Stop dripping all over the floor," he said. He grabbed a tea towel and tossed it to Iruka, then stepped over to the sink and plunged his hands into the water. "Anko's different," he said. "They'll care if she's gone. She's Orochimaru's pet student. That makes her more important than the rest of us."

Iruka wrung the tea towel between his hands.

"You really think so?"

"Yeah. And they'd care if you went missing too. You're Sandaime's favourite, though God knows why. Not just anyone could pull all the shit you do and get sent for special seals training. I don't know how the fuck you did it, but you're special too."

His shoulders were hunched, and he was still scrubbing the same plate, although it must be clean by now. Iruka suddenly felt bad. Mizuki's jounin-sensei had been killed on the night of the kyuubi, and since then he'd been bounced from team to team as an extra, never quite finding his place, in danger of being forgotten altogether. His training had suffered, his income from missions – never high for a genin – had dwindled to almost nothing, and his battle with the admin staff in the mission room to get him assigned to a permanent team was like butting his head against a wall. He went every week and had to say the same things, fill out the same forms, try to chase up the answers without losing his temper and getting kicked out of the Tower for the hundredth time.

If Mizuki went missing, there was no one who would care. No one would even notice. The cracks in the system were swallowing him whole.

"I'd save you," Iruka said, and Mizuki's hands stilled in the sink. "If the bogeyman took you, I'd come find you. I'd bring you home."

"Like you could do anything," Mizuki mumbled. "You're just a genin. We'd both end up dead."

Iruka glanced towards the hallway, to the entrance Anko should have stepped through an hour ago, and where he'd last seen her leaving this morning with a promise to meet them in the cemetery. He willed the front door to open, to bring her back in with some flimsy excuse, but the seconds ticked by and the lock didn't turn.

"I'd still try," he said. "And if Anko doesn't come back, I'll look for her too. We'll look for her together, right?"

Mizuki didn't look round but he nodded slowly. "Yeah. If she hasn't come back by the morning, we'll find her."

Iruka glanced out through the window. The sun was still setting, and if Anko was out there the night would be lonely and cold.

The morning had never seemed so far away.

## Chapter End Notes

This is my fic for the kakairu mini bang, inspired by the theme 'urban legends'. Part two is written but needs editing, and part three is about half written, so expect more in the near future.

## Part II: Death and the White Fang of Konoha

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Anko still hadn't returned by the time Iruka and Mizuki went to bed that night. Their apartment was only two rooms, so the boys shared the bedroom and Anko usually slept on the living room floor. Iruka laid out the futon for her before they went to bed, in case she came in late and was too tired to do it herself. It wouldn't be the first time she'd curled up on the couch instead and complained of a crick in the neck the next day. He lay awake long into the night, the floor hard beneath the thin layer of his futon, listening for the sound of the door, but it never came. Beside him, Mizuki tossed and turned, sleeping in short spurts and then waking and glancing at Iruka, asking with a look if she'd come home, and each time Iruka shook his head.

He wasn't sure what time it was when he finally drifted off, but the next time he woke it was to the thin dawn light creeping through the bare window. Mizuki was asleep at his side, his blankets thrown half off and his lips parted, snoring gently. Iruka turned over, away from the window, about to try and get back to sleep when he remembered Anko and found himself suddenly wide awake. Had she come back during the night? His body ached with tiredness, but he stood up and stepped carefully over Mizuki, padding barefoot out of the bedroom and across the narrow hallway into the lounge.

The room was empty, but Iruka knew at once that Anko had been there. The futon was still laid out and unslept on but it had been kicked to the side and the window was open. Iruka immediately wriggled out through the gap, sticking to the outside wall with chakra and crawling up the side of the building. They were only two floors from the roof, which wasn't accessible from inside the building, and it wasn't unusual for the three of them to make their way up there from



the window, although Iruka didn't usually make the climb in pyjamas. It was too early in the morning for anyone to notice him though. The street below was empty and quiet except for the chirping of birds.

Iruka pulled himself up onto the roof and immediately spotted Anko sitting with her back to him on the other side, her feet dangling over the edge and a breeze ruffling her hair. He almost called out to her, but there was something about her posture that made him think again. She was hunched into herself, staring out into nothing over the village, her hands clenched tightly around the edge of the roof.

Iruka crossed the space between them and sat down next to her. She didn't look at him, but she didn't seem startled at his presence either.

"When did you get home?" Iruka asked.

Anko shrugged. "Late."

There were dark circles under her eyes, and a bone-deep tiredness in every line of her body. Iruka looked out across the rooftops, following her gaze, but saw only covered windows and the grey morning sky.

"You missed the ceremony yesterday."

"Yeah." She drummed her heels rhythmically against the side of the building. "Something came up."

"Something *came up*?"

"Uh huh."

Iruka waited for her to expand, but she didn't. Just kept staring at the horizon with exhaustion in her eyes.

"Where were you?"

No answer. She was still wearing the same clothes she'd left in the day before, and Iruka could smell the sour tang of her sweat. Her hitae-ate was askew on her forehead and her hair was coming loose from its ponytail.

"We thought the bogeyman had got you," he said.

Anko looked at him then, with the barest hint of surprise.

"Why?" she asked, her voice suddenly more alert. "Why would you think that?"

"Because you didn't come home!" Iruka said. His frustration was getting the better of him, and he kicked her on the ankle. She kicked him back. "We were worried about you. Even Mizuki was freaking out. He told me this story about the Land of the Dead – he said the bogeyman is a demon and he takes the kids back there."

"A demon, huh?"

"Where the hell were you, Anko?"

Anko leaned forwards, shifting right to the edge of the roof so she could peer down into the street below, her elbows on her thighs.

"That's my business."

"Damnit, Anko! Stop being so difficult and tell me already."

Below them, a door opened across the street and an older teenage girl dressed in a chuunin flak jacket came outside. She didn't notice the two pairs of eyes watching her, merely yawned widely as she started trudging down the road in the direction of the village centre.

"Hey, Iruka?" Anko said. "Do you believe those stories? The ones Mizuki was scaring you with?"

"He wasn't *scaring* me," Iruka said, scowling at her. "I don't know what I believe. What do *you* believe?"

Anko scratched at her scalp, a few more strands of hair falling loose from her ponytail. There was a scrape on her arm, scabbed over and pink around the wound.

“It’s true,” she said. “It’s all true.”

Her certainty gave Iruka pause. Mizuki was full of shit at the best of times but when Anko said it, it chimed differently. Before the night her parents had died, she’d been loud and brash and Iruka wouldn’t have put it past her to prank him, but she’d become a different person since then. More withdrawn, more serious, somehow older. Her words carried a weight that Mizuki’s – and even Eagle’s – didn’t.

“If it’s true,” Iruka said slowly, “then do you think I should start wearing a mask?” Anko didn’t wear a mask either, although Mizuki bitched at them both constantly for it.

Anko laughed. “It’s too late for that. He’s already seen you, Iruka – *everyone’s* seen you by now. You’ve made sure of that.”

The breeze picked up, and Iruka shivered, suddenly very aware of his pyjamas and of how exposed they were on the edge of the roof.

“So what should I do?” he asked.

“Be careful,” Anko said. “Carry a knife, keep out of the shadows, and whatever happens, don’t get caught.”

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Mizuki was still scolding Anko when Iruka left the flat after breakfast. Neither of them had managed to pry any more details out of her but Iruka had decided not to worry about it; his curiosity was still burning but she’d come home safe and that was all that mattered. If she’d had a tough time yesterday and hadn’t wanted to be around people

or within sight of the graves of her parents, well, he could understand that. When she was ready, she might talk about it but if not then she was right – it was her business and not their right to pry.

There was nothing Iruka had to do today, but he couldn't stand staying in the flat for longer than necessary. The space was cramped with three of them sharing what ought to be a one person apartment, and Iruka tried not to go home except to eat and sleep. 'Home' – the word still felt wrong, ill-fitting. Iruka's family home hadn't been damaged in the kyuubi attack, and he'd lived there alone for two weeks after his parents had died, struggling to feed himself with the food that was left, spending hours lying in his parents' bed and half-expecting to hear their voices.

They'd sold the house and all of his parents' things after that. Iruka wasn't entirely sure who 'they' were even now, but he'd been moved in with a neighbour for a short while – an older woman with no idea how to handle a grieving twelve-year-old, though she'd tried her best – and then Mizuki had turned up on the doorstep one evening and bundled him away. He'd been the opposite of Iruka in those first weeks. Instead of the listlessness that had kept Iruka in bed, Mizuki had been full of a restless energy. He'd taken control, not just of himself but of Iruka and Anko, bullying them into eating, showering, leaving the house. All the small things that had suddenly seemed so hard.

It was only when Mizuki had dragged him back out into the world that Iruka had realised he'd been waiting. For his parents, or for someone who could take their place – for someone to help him. But no one was coming. No one besides Mizuki and Anko, because no one had time for the kyuubi orphans. Even Iruka's jounin-sensei was distracted, placing their team's training and missions on hold while he helped dig through the rubble for the dead, rehouse the homeless, rebuild the tattered remnants of the village. Iruka might be waiting but no one was coming. All around him, people started wearing masks, hiding from death, but for Iruka, the only means of survival was to make himself be seen.

For that reason, he was going to visit Asuka-sensei today. It wasn't the first time he'd skipped a seals tutorial, but every time he did he was seized with a panic afterwards that she hadn't even noticed his absence. That she'd cancel their classes, find someone else to be her apprentice, and Iruka would be left with only his crappy genin team missions, which got more and more awkward each time they met. It was probably only a matter of time before they found some excuse to kick him off the team, and if he lost them *and* Asuka-sensei, what would be left? He'd be in the same position as Mizuki, and he knew he didn't have the strength to fight his fate the way Mizuki did.

It was the time of the morning when the village was just waking up. Shops were starting to open, shinobi and civilians were on their way to work or the mission room, but there was still a sleepy hush in the streets. Iruka had the start of a headache pulsing in his temple so for once he slunk through the streets in silence, too tired to cause a nuisance of himself. Maybe later if the sun came out he could find a sunny spot in the park and nap. Until then he could run on empty for a while. He was used to it.

As he passed by the orphanage, he spotted a familiar figure coming out through the front door. Iruka knew a lot of the kids from the orphanage – they hung out in the same streets in the afternoon, kicking a ball around or heckling passers-by – but he'd never seen this particular person here before. It was Kakashi, and to Iruka's great surprise he was carrying a small child, who was squirming happily in his arms and chattering nine to the dozen.

Iruka dawdled on the other side of the street, watching as Kakashi spoke to a middle-aged matronly woman who'd followed him to the door. Although Iruka had never been personally under her care, he knew enough of the orphans to think of her as Old Bitch-Face, the common moniker the kids gave her. She ran the orphanage and had a reputation for being strict and unsympathetic, although you wouldn't know it to look at her now. She was smiling at Kakashi, almost simpering, and Iruka rolled his eyes. Probably happy he was

taking a kid off her hands for a while, although why Kakashi would do such a thing was a mystery to Iruka.

The child in Kakashi's arms was a small blond boy who couldn't have been more than a year old, and Kakashi looked different in his presence. He stood up straighter, and when Iruka crept close enough to hear their voices he heard an uncharacteristic lightness in Kakashi's tone. Despite how often he watched Kakashi, Iruka had never seen him with a kid before. Surely he couldn't be a relative. Iruka had asked around about Kakashi enough to know he didn't have any family left, and there certainly wasn't any resemblance he could see between them.

Old Bitch-Face bid them farewell with a little wave that to Iruka's eyes looked entirely insincere, and then Kakashi turned and started down the street, the child staring around with wide blue eyes and wriggling with excitement. Iruka followed, hanging back so as not to be noticed and sauntering casually with his hands in his pockets, gaze so fixed on his quarry that he didn't hear his name being called until someone grabbed him by the arm and startled him.

"Damnit, Iruka-senpai, don't ignore me," a girl said, frowning at him.

It was Junko, one of the kids from the orphanage, a couple of years younger than Iruka and in her final year at the academy. She had red hair pulled back in the sensible ponytail the orphanage enforced on all their girls, and was wearing a backpack.

"Hey, Junko," Iruka said, glancing after Kakashi again. "Aren't you late for school?"

"Probably," Junko said, unconcerned. "What are you staring at?"

Iruka opened his mouth to say 'nothing', then paused.

"Who's that kid who just left with Kakashi?" he asked.

Junko followed his gaze. “Oh, Naruto?” She shrugged. “Just some kid. Why?”

Iruka was still staring after Kakashi, who turned left onto another street and vanished from sight. Automatically, Iruka started following again, Junko at his heels.

“But who *is* he?” Iruka asked. “How does Kakashi know him?”

“I dunno,” Junko said. “He comes round sometimes and takes Naruto out for lunch or whatever. Why do you care?”

Iruka didn’t have a good answer. He didn’t know quite why he’d become fixated on Kakashi over the past year, but he was irritated that Junko had known about Kakashi’s connection to this Naruto kid and hadn’t told him about it sooner. Not that she had any reason to, but it still smarted that she’d known something he hadn’t.

“It doesn’t matter,” Iruka muttered. “Just wondering what the great Copy Nin could possibly want with some nobody brat.”

Junko shrugged. She glanced back to make sure they were out of sight of the orphanage and then pulled out her hair tie, shaking her hair out and smoothing it down.

“Forget about him,” she said with a touch of impatience. “Did you hear about Rika and Takeo?”

It took Iruka a moment to place the names. They were two of the kids from the orphanage, a year or two younger than Junko.

“What about them?”

Junko leaned closer so their shoulders brushed as they walked.

“The bogeyman got them,” she said.

A couple of girls from Junko’s class – not orphanage kids, you could tell by the way their hair shone and their clothes were new – barged

past them, knocking into Junko. One of the girls glanced at Iruka and smiled, and then they both giggled and hurried on. Junko flushed and flipped them off.

“Bitches,” she muttered.

Iruka had barely noticed the interruption. “What do you mean, he got them?” he asked. “What happened?”

Junko shrugged. “Nobody knows. They were here yesterday morning. Kaoru said they went out before the memorial ceremony, but Kiyoko said she saw them at the graveyard and they got lost in the crowd afterwards. But they never came back to the orphanage, that’s for sure.”

Two at once. That was unheard of. The kids who’d gone missing always vanished one at a time, a slow trickle that none of the adults had noticed. To take two at once was bold. Someone would have to realise that was wrong.

“What does Old Bitch-Face think about it?” Iruka asked.

Junko pulled a face. “She says they’ve run off and they’ll be back in a few days.”

“So no one’s looking for them?”

Junko snorted. “Yeah, sure, she dropped everything and called ANBU. As if. Like she cares.”

Iruka kicked a stone, which bounced ahead of them and almost hit a man in the ankle. Junko was watching him closely, like she expected him to do something. But what? What was he supposed to do?

“I’ll look for them,” he said. “And I’ll spread the word. If we’re all keeping an eye out, someone’s got to spot them.”

“If they’re still here,” Junko said. She didn’t look convinced. “I heard the bogeyman takes them back to the underworld with him, to see



their parents.” They caught up again to the stone, and this time she kicked it, watching it curve into the gutter. “Hey Iruka, do you think he’s really a bad guy? The bogeyman? I mean, if he really wants to help us see our parents again...” Her voice had turned wistful.

“Of course he’s a bad guy,” Iruka snapped, alarmed that she could think otherwise. “We can’t see our parents again, Junko. They’re dead. They’re not coming back.”

“But if we could go to the Land of the Dead...”

Iruka stopped walking and grabbed her roughly by the arm. She made a pained noise but stopped protesting when she saw his expression.

“Don’t go with him,” Iruka said urgently. “If you see him, if he comes for you, promise me you won’t go with him.”

Junko blinked at him, taken aback by his sudden intensity.

“Promise me,” Iruka insisted.

“All right,” Junko said. “All right, I won’t.” But she didn’t sound as if she believed herself, and Iruka wasn’t sure either. He gripped her arm tighter, feeling helpless.

“You can’t go to the Land of the Dead, Junko,” he said. “Not unless you’re dead too. Don’t believe him if he says you can. He’s a liar. Monsters lie.”

Junko made another small sound of pain and Iruka let go of her arm, taking a step back and tugging at his ponytail, suddenly wanting to end this conversation.

“What would you do?” Junko asked. “If he came for you?”

Iruka remembered Mizuki’s story of the girl in the schoolyard, climbing the tree and finding the bogeyman below her. He imagined

himself crouched in the branches and the man looking up at him, smiling with the jaws of the kyuubi.

“I’d catch him,” Iruka said. “And I’d make him tell me where all of the others are, and I’d go and bring them back.”

“Could you bring my mum back too?” Junko asked softly.

Iruka swallowed hard. “She’s dead, Junko,” he said, but she kept looking at him until he caved. “But yeah,” he allowed. “If I found a way, I’d bring all of them back.”

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Only once Junko was out of sight and Iruka’s pulse had dropped back to a normal level did he remember Kakashi and Naruto. He’d been so distracted that he’d walked right past the street Kakashi had taken, but he backtracked and made the turn, hurrying, wondering if he could still catch up.

As luck had it, Kakashi had also been waylaid, and he was still in the street with a teenage boy Iruka recognised as Maito Gai, who was carrying on a very loud conversation with Naruto as much as Kakashi. His enthusiasm had infected the boy, who was bouncing happily in Kakashi’s arms and reaching out towards Gai, making loud cheerful noises that could have been words, although Iruka couldn’t decipher them. He let out a sigh and hung back beside a shop window. He’d always wondered about Kakashi and Gai’s friendship. They seemed an odd pair, and at first he’d thought the relationship was one-sided, but he’d seen them together enough to decide that the friendship was genuine.

Gai finally tore himself away, Naruto waving enthusiastically as he left, and Kakashi carried on walking. They didn’t go far. Iruka followed them to a café a couple of streets away, and then dithered

outside when Kakashi went in. He only had a few hundred yen to last him the day, and it would be stupid to blow it on food or tea when he'd already eaten this morning. He hoped Kakashi would sit by the window, but that hope was dashed when he peered in and spotted Kakashi taking a table at the back of the café, a member of staff bringing over a highchair and helping him get Naruto settled. Damn it. Iruka chewed at a chapped nub of skin on his lip, then swore under his breath and pushed open the café door, tensing at the jaunty sound of the bell. He needn't have worried. Kakashi was ordering food at the counter and didn't look round as Iruka stepped inside.

They didn't lock eyes as Kakashi moved away with a tray of coffee and food, but Iruka was sure Kakashi had at least clocked his presence. Iruka kept glancing over as he ordered a pot of tea, and he sat as close as he dared, at a table behind Kakashi, allowing him to stare unnoticed.

"What that?" Naruto was asking again and again, pointing to different objects, and then giggling when Kakashi patiently named everything for him, sometimes more than once.

After several rounds of naming everything on the table, Naruto suddenly looked up and his large blue eyes bored straight into Iruka's. His pulse kicked up a notch, especially when the boy raised a pudgy finger and pointed right at him.

"What that?" he asked again.

Kakashi turned around in his seat, and for one breath-taking moment his gaze met Iruka's. It was the first time Kakashi had ever looked directly at him, and Iruka froze with his teacup halfway to his lips, feeling naked. Then Kakashi turned back around and Iruka lowered the cup with shaking fingers.

"That's a boy, Naruto," Kakashi said. "Don't bother strangers, OK? Why don't you have some of this porridge, hm? It should be cool by now."

He kept talking, but Iruka was no longer listening. A stranger. After all this time of following Kakashi, of wondering about him, hounding the village gossips for any snippet of information, Kakashi still didn't even recognise him. Iruka had known that, of course he'd known – why would someone as famous as Sharingan Kakashi notice a nobody like Iruka, even if Iruka shadowed him every day? Iruka was just another orphan. An inconvenient leftover, best ignored.

But that toddler that Kakashi was patiently feeding – he was an orphan too. He wasn't family, so why the hell was Kakashi wasting his precious time babysitting if he didn't have to? Who was this kid – this brat – who had the nerve to hog all of Kakashi's attention? To be noticed without even trying? What was so special about that stupid, tiny little shit?

Iruka was gripping the teacup so tightly his fingers hurt. He wanted to fling it at the back of Kakashi's head – or past him at that chubby, porridge-smeared face burbling happily as Kakashi fed him tiny spoonfuls. That would make Kakashi see him. He could picture the teacup shattering against Naruto's nose, the shocked look on Kakashi's face, he could hear the shrieks that Naruto would make, awful and ear-shattering, like the screams on the night when Iruka's parents had died, cutting through the terrible bellows of the kyuubi, so close, so close that Iruka had to clamp his hands over his own mouth to keep himself quiet...

The cup slipped from his fingers and fell the inch into the saucer with a clatter, jerking Iruka back to the scent of coffee and fresh pastries, the cheerful chalkboards advertising specials on the walls, and the hiss of the coffee machine. He blinked a few times, readjusting to the scene before him, and his gaze landed on Naruto again. The boy was so small, so fragile. Had Iruka really wanted to hurt him? He was suddenly overcome by nausea and stood up, scraping his chair on the floor and abandoning his half-drunk tea. In his haste to leave, he almost bumped into a customer and ducked his head, mumbling something that passed as an apology, slipping out onto the street on weak legs and sucking in lungfuls of air.

A startled couple stared at him as Iruka cut sharply in front of them, but today for the first time in a long while he suddenly didn't want to be seen – was afraid of what people might see if they looked at him. He raced across the street and into the network of alleyways, losing himself in the narrow twists and turns, in the blind, shadowy spaces out of sight.

Mizuki was right. Monsters existed. And Iruka was one of them.

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The cemetery was as empty today as it had been full yesterday. Iruka stood before the two stones inscribed with his parents' names and stared at them until the words blurred. He hated the sameness of this part of the cemetery. All of the kyuubi victims had the same words inscribed on their gravestones, the same death date, like they were one cohesive whole. 'Tragically taken defending their village'. It was so impersonal, so bland. In death, his parents had been reduced to just two more of the sixty-three that had died that night.

He didn't feel closer to them standing here. He wished he did, but there was no trace of the people they'd been in life. Only cold earth and colder stone, and Iruka could bring no warmth to their side. He was barely more than a stone himself, a memorial to the person he'd used to be.

When he couldn't stand the emptiness any longer, he retreated to the cherry tree he'd watched the ceremony from the day before. He scaled up the branches, his limbs heavier somehow than yesterday, and settled himself halfway up, close to the trunk, hidden by the leaves. After seeing the cemetery packed with people yesterday, it seemed wrong that it should be so empty today. Didn't the dead deserve to be remembered even after the anniversary? But other people had jobs, missions, training, school. Life went on.

Iruka must have fallen asleep somehow because suddenly he was jerked awake by a large raindrop landing on his cheek. His ass was numb from sitting on the branch for God knew how long, and he didn't feel any less tired for his impromptu nap. If anything, he felt worse now than he'd done before, groggy and stiff.

A light rain was falling, but aside from the patter of droplets on the leaves, the cemetery was quiet. Iruka glanced out over the graves. Not a single other person was here. Yet he felt the prickling sensation that he was being watched. The hairs on the back of his arms knew, even if his eyes and brain hadn't put it together yet. Someone else was here. A movement flickered in the corner of his vision, and Iruka glanced down.

A man was standing at the base of the tree, looking up at him. Iruka tensed, and then let out a breath as he recognised him. It was only Anko's jounin-sensei, watching him with a small frown of concern.

"That's a strange place to sleep, Iruka-kun," Orochimaru said.

Iruka shifted on the branch, stretching to try and alleviate the stiffness in his muscles. He couldn't tell if he'd been sleeping for ten minutes or two hours; the dull, grey light seeping through the clouds was timeless. It made him feel oddly dislocated, as though he'd become lost sometime between falling asleep and waking.

"I didn't mean to fall asleep," he said. "I just wanted to sit for a while."

Orochimaru nodded, as though that made perfect sense. Iruka had met Orochimaru a handful of times before, always briefly, never exchanging more than the required pleasantries due between Anko's jounin-sensei and her friend, but he knew a lot about the man by reputation. Orochimaru was one of the sannin after all, even more famous than Sharingan Kakashi, and for good reason. He carried himself with all the pride that Kakashi lacked, and the gleam of intelligence in his eyes was scalpel-sharp. Coming under his gaze felt like a slow dissection.

"Is everything all right?" he asked.

Iruka almost laughed.

"Well, my parents are dead, someone's picking off kids one by one, and no one's doing anything about it," he said. "So no, nothing's all right."

Orochimaru's expression didn't change, as though Iruka hadn't said anything unexpected.

"Ah yes," he said. "Anko tells me they're calling him the bogeyman."

That brought Iruka up short. He stared at Orochimaru, who waited patiently for him to gather his wits and respond.

"You know about that?" he asked, leaning out further over the branch. "Anko told you?"

"Anko tells me a lot of things," Orochimaru said. The ghost of a smile passed over his lips, as though he were privy to secrets even Iruka didn't know. Maybe he was. Anko didn't talk that much these days. Iruka didn't know what was going on in her head at the best of times, and only half wanted to. "Though there are so many stories it's hard to know what's real and what isn't."

"He's real," Iruka said. "Whatever he is, the bogeyman is real."

He couldn't tell if Orochimaru believed him or if he was only humouring him. He was watching Iruka with a little half-smile that Iruka would have taken for amusement except that his gaze was so intense. Yet those dark eyes gave nothing away.

"You know, Iruka-kun," he said, "I've heard a lot about your exploits recently. About how you've been setting traps for ANBU. Good enough traps that the most skilled seals master in the village took you on as her apprentice. You must be a very smart boy."

Iruka plucked a leaf off a branch by his head and shrugged.

“I’m not that smart,” he mumbled. “I haven’t caught an ANBU yet.”

“I’d be very interested to hear about it if you do,” Orochimaru murmured. “But I’m also interested to know what you think is happening to these children.”

“The bogeyman takes them to the Land of the Dead,” Iruka said.

He knew how it sounded, like a fairytale told to scare children from straying too far from home, but he didn’t care. It wasn’t like Orochimaru would believe him even if he twisted the story to make it fit better into the clean, ordered world they’d left buried in the rubble a year ago.

“Why?” Orochimaru asked.

Iruka blinked at him.

“Why what?”

“Why does he take them to the Land of the Dead?”

Iruka opened his mouth, and then snapped it closed again. *Why did* the bogeyman take children? Why carry them off back to the underworld? He remembered what Junko had asked: is he a bad guy?

“My friend thinks he wants to take them back to their parents,” he said slowly. “But the dead can’t be brought back to life so...he must be killing them, right? The kids?”

Orochimaru looked out across the rows of gravestones and made a thoughtful sound.

“There are stories about heroes who’ve gone into Death’s domain and walked out unscathed,” he said.

Just a few months ago, Iruka would have rolled his eyes at that. Now, however, he hesitated, and then asked, “Are any of them true?”



“Some of them most certainly aren’t,” Orochimaru said. “But others...” He trailed off, looked back up at Iruka and smiled. “There’s one in particular that comes to mind. You’ve heard of Hatake Sakumo, the White Fang?”

Iruka’s pulse kicked up a notch. Of course he knew about Sakumo. Even if he hadn’t been Kakashi’s father – and therefore of great interest to Iruka – he had been infamous during Iruka’s childhood.

“Uh huh,” he said, shifting position among the branches, the better to see down through the leaves. “He met Death?”

“So they say,” Orochimaru said. He tucked a lock of hair behind his ear, the gesture elegant, and paused before carrying on. “I’m sure you know he was sent on a mission that went badly wrong. I won’t bore you with details you must have heard before, but they say that Death had taken notice of the White Fang of Konoha. Death had held a grudge against the village from the time of the Shodaime. He felt that we owed him the lives of our strongest shinobi, and Sakumo was one of the strongest.”

“He should have joined ANBU,” Iruka said, and Orochimaru nodded.

“Indeed he should,” he said. “I can’t say why he didn’t. Maybe he didn’t believe the old stories or maybe he thought he was so strong that even Death couldn’t touch him. He might have been right. No one knows exactly what happened on that mission, but Death came for the whole team. He managed to take Sakumo’s teammates but Sakumo himself survived.”

Iruka frowned. “No, his teammates lived but the mission went wrong.”

Orochimaru held up a finger. “Patience. This is a version of the story you’ve heard, but it takes a different route to the same end.”

“OK,” Iruka said doubtfully. “So everyone dies except Sakumo. Then what?”

“Sakumo was not the kind of man to abandon his teammates, even after their souls had left their bodies,” Orochimaru said. “There are entrances to the underworld if you know where to look for them, and Sakumo found one of these doorways between worlds. He crept down into the Land of the Dead and determined to find his friends and bring them back.

“There are all sorts of monsters who live in the underworld, and they tried to bar his way, but Sakumo was too strong for all of them. He fought his way past every obstacle, and when he finally reached the chamber where the souls of his friends were being held, Death was waiting for him there.”

“Why didn’t Death just kill him?” Iruka asked. “If he was already in the Land of the Dead then it should have been easy, right?”

“Some stories say that if a living person spends too long in the underworld, the very air will poison them,” Orochimaru said.

“Perhaps Death thought he didn’t have to lift a finger. Perhaps he was simply curious how strong Sakumo truly was. When they finally came face to face, however, Death was impressed enough that he decided to allow Sakumo to take his friends and leave.”

“What was the catch?” Iruka asked sharply, and Orochimaru laughed.

“You have the mind of a trickster,” he said, with more approval than Iruka was used to hearing. “There was indeed a condition. Death never gives up a soul for free. He made a bargain with Sakumo: that he’d let Sakumo’s teammates leave but Sakumo would owe him a soul of equal value, and when Death came to collect it, Sakumo must give it willingly.”

Iruka swallowed dryly, remembering how the story ended. But he didn’t interrupt.

“Of course, Sakumo had saved his teammates but they’d still failed their mission,” Orochimaru said. “And like any elite shinobi, Sakumo

had his political enemies at home. They stirred up enough gossip and rumour that Sakumo became a pariah, shamed for valuing the lives of his friends above the honour of the village. But Sakumo didn't care. He knew he'd done the right thing. His only worry was what would happen when Death came back for his due. Because he'd promised Death a soul of equal value but Death hadn't asked for *Sakumo's* soul, and the more he thought about the vagueness of his promise, the more Sakumo began to fear that Death didn't want him after all. He feared that there might be another more tempting soul that Death would ask for."

The name burst from Iruka's lips. "Kakashi."

Orochimaru rewarded him with that half smile again. "You really are very smart, Iruka-kun. Yes, naturally Sakumo feared for his son, who was already gaining a reputation as a genius. And while Sakumo wasn't the kind of man to renege on a bargain, he also wasn't the kind of father who could sacrifice his child. So he looked to the old stories and he came up with a way to protect Kakashi from the gaze of Death." Orochimaru gestured for Iruka to speak. "You know what I'm referring to, don't you?"

Iruka did. "His mask," he said breathlessly. "That's why Kakashi wears a mask."

"Very good." Orochimaru was watching him with those sharp, approving eyes again but Iruka barely noticed, too caught up in this revelation. "Sakumo took a skein of cloth and made Kakashi's masks himself. Enough that he would never have to bare his face to the village again. And so when Death came to Konoha to pick out his victim, he saw Kakashi in the training fields and hungered for his talent, but when he visited Sakumo's home he didn't recognise the boy who lived there. And so, when the time came for him to claim his debt, it was Sakumo's soul he asked for, and Sakumo's soul he received."

In the ensuing silence, Iruka was sure they were both picturing the same scene: Sakumo's suicide, an offering of his soul made in the

most bloody manner. Iruka had thought about his death before many times, but his daydreams had always revolved around the young boy who had stepped into the room and found his father's body. Now, the second person in the room was a shadowy figure, his long fingers reaching to pluck Sakumo's soul from his lips as he exhaled a final breath.

Fingers that had also itched for Kakashi's soul, much like the bogeyman, preying on children...

"Orochimaru-sensei," Iruka said slowly, "why would Death have wanted Kakashi? Even if he was a genius, Sakumo would still have been stronger. Kakashi was just a kid."

"Hmm, I wonder," Orochimaru said softly. "There's something about children. They're still so soft that they can be moulded into any shape you like. And they're so easily led astray if only you can persuade them to take your hand."

The light was dimming in the sky, either because evening was drawing close or because the rainclouds had grown thicker. The rain was no heavier or lighter, and it was seeping through the leaves to drip into Iruka's hair, onto his shirt, which had grown translucent in patches as it clung to his skin. He hadn't noticed the cold while immersed in the story, but now he shivered.

"What will you do, Iruka-kun?" Orochimaru asked. "If the bogeyman keeps taking your friends, how will you stop him?"

Somehow, in the rain-drenched silence of the cemetery, the question didn't seem as strange as it might have done in the light and bustle of the village streets. It seemed strange, in fact, that no one had asked him sooner. Iruka's thoughts came slowly, and he let them crystallise, he and Orochimaru both waiting patiently for the answer to form.

"I think..." he started, but then stopped as a figure tore across the graves towards them.

“Sensei,” Anko yelled. She skidded to a halt in the muddy grass when she reached them, panting, her hair stuck to her face with the rain, her eyes too wide. “Sensei,” she said again, but she had noticed Iruka and was staring up at him. Something about the look in her eyes made Iruka’s skin crawl. There was something wild about her. Something he hadn’t seen before.

Orochimaru strode over to her, frowning. “What’s wrong?”

But she was still looking up into the tree. “Iruka? What are you doing here?” Her voice was ragged.

“Anko?” Iruka scrambled down, but once he was on the ground he found he didn’t quite dare to approach her. He took one wary step forwards and she tensed, lips curling back like an animal’s.

“Go home,” she said, and he noticed a scratch on her neck. Had it been there that morning? There were three scored lines, like something had clawed at her, red and fresh, a day old at the most.

“Anko, what...?” he tried again, but she barely resembled the Anko he’d seen this morning and he didn’t know how to speak to her. The sound of his voice seemed to distress her, and she shook her head, the damp hair flapping.

“Go home,” she screamed. “Go home, go home, go home!”

Orochimaru grabbed her by the shoulders, but Iruka didn’t wait to hear what he said to her. He turned and pelted away between the graves, her shrieks ringing in his ears, her wild eyes burning the back of his neck even after he’d left the graveyard far behind.

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Iruka didn't go home. The rain eased off as he wandered aimlessly through the streets, his blood still singing from the shock of Anko's screams. What had happened between this morning and the scene in the cemetery to unravel her like that? In all the years he'd known her, he'd never seen her lose control, not even in those first months after her parents had died.

Guiltily, he wrenched his thoughts away from her. Orochimaru was with her, he'd take care of her. In the meantime Iruka needed to think about the bogeyman and Death and why children were being taken. He felt like the pieces were starting to slot together but they still needed some adjustments before he could see the picture they were forming.

That was what he *should* think about, but instead he found his footsteps taking him into the east of the village, to the large walled and gated properties that made Iruka salivate with envy. He'd walked this route so many times he didn't have to think about where he was going, barely had to pay attention until suddenly his feet halted and he blinked up at the gate before him. The name Hatake was etched into the metal sign on the gatepost, and when Iruka pressed a hand to the wooden gate he felt a breathless thrill at the crackle of the wards. They felt like Kakashi's chakra, an acidic tang of static electricity that Iruka could taste at the back of his throat. He swallowed, as if he could draw it down into himself and carry it with him everywhere.

It was the mask that had first drawn him to Kakashi. The mask, and the fact that he was an orphan too. It was the only thing they had in common. Kakashi was from a different class of shinobi – in terms of both wealth and talent – and Iruka had no illusions that they would ever be friends. Even if Kakashi noticed his existence, he'd have no reason to give Iruka the time of day. And yet for some reason he couldn't quite grasp, Iruka needed to lurk at the fringes of his life. He needed to watch Kakashi, to know him as well as one stranger can know another, and to wait breathlessly for the day when Kakashi finally learnt his name.

The story of Sakumo, and how Kakashi came to wear a mask, made sense in a way the other stories hadn't at first. Maybe it was the way Orochimaru had told it, or maybe it was the familiarity of the events, the closeness of the story. It had happened within his lifetime, to the father of someone he saw on an almost daily basis, and he'd heard the other version – the version without the underworld and Sakumo's bargain with Death – so many times that it didn't take too much effort to layer the extra details over the top. To believe in it all as easily as though he'd always suspected there was more to the tale.

The need to see Kakashi, always there at the back of his mind, now overwhelmed him. He wouldn't be here in the compound, not at this time. Kakashi seemed to harbour the same attitude towards home as Iruka, treating it as a place to be avoided as much as possible and tolerated only when he couldn't go a moment longer without food or rest. Iruka still hadn't seen the time, but as the clouds had grown lighter, he'd decided it was still afternoon rather than evening, and so he turned and set his path towards the village centre, on a mission to stake out all of Kakashi's usual haunts until he found him.

An hour later, Iruka had checked all of Kakashi's favourite restaurants and cafes, the park where he liked to sit and read, and shops he frequented. He'd even peered through the windows of Gai's home, the only friend whose house Kakashi ever visited, but he hadn't found a trace of Kakashi anywhere. Frustrated, Iruka was forced to conclude that Kakashi had either left the village on a mission or he was inside the Hokage Tower, and since Iruka was still banned, he couldn't do more than linger outside and wait to see if Kakashi emerged. After twenty minutes of restlessly prowling around the Tower, an ANBU appeared and gave him a meaningful look, and Iruka flipped her off and sloped away, defeated.

With Kakashi somewhere out of his grasp, Iruka didn't know what to do with himself. It was too early still to go home, and he didn't feel like seeking out Mizuki. He considered making another ANBU trap but he was almost out of supplies. Shit, that reminded him, he still hadn't done the homework that Asuka-sensei had set him the last

time he'd actually turned up for a tutorial. And he still hadn't apologised for skipping the last one. Double shit. Well, at least that was his afternoon planned for him. It was time to go shopping.

As he considered what he might need for the homework, he turned his footsteps towards the market. He'd been banned from the shinobi supply store last month for helping himself to a few items with too little finesse. It wasn't his fault he didn't have any money to spend on chakra paper. How else was he supposed to do his homework if he didn't have paper to draw the seals? He'd had to pinch a few sheets from a stall in the market instead, along with a rather nice fountain pen and enough ink to last him a few weeks at least. He'd coveted a proper quill, one made out of a long black feather, but the stall owner had seen him looking, clocked him as the kind of kid who couldn't afford a luxury like that, and shooed him away before he could slip it into his pocket.

On the whole, the market was a good place to get a five finger discount. It was usually busy, especially in the afternoons when the Academy had just let out and there were kids everywhere. It was easy to slip among them, become just another face in the crowd and wait for a distraction. Iruka had got good at it during this past year. He didn't even feel bad about it anymore. After all, he couldn't earn money unless he went on missions, and he couldn't complete missions if he didn't have supplies. Therefore, by stealing he was ensuring that one day he'd have enough money to actually buy things. It was a fair trade off.

He'd asked Sandaime more than once about the money made from his parents' house. It had been put away for him, or so he'd been told, and the meagre monthly payments that covered his share of the rent, bills and food came from a bank account in his name, but beyond that allowance he wouldn't be able to access the rest until he turned sixteen. Sixteen! That was three whole years away and he needed money *now*. Sandaime hadn't even known how much he was getting each month – hadn't been able to say who'd decided the amount – and although he'd promised Iruka he'd get someone to



review his allowance, nothing had changed. Iruka suspected that Sandaime had forgotten as soon as he'd walked out of the room. He had bigger things to worry about than Iruka's daily survival. Him and everyone else.

There were a few kids wandering around the market when he arrived. Either the Academy had only just let out, or it was late enough that most of them had already gone home. Either way, while it wasn't the ideal shopping time, it would do at a pinch. He'd worked with less.

While he was here, he might as well pick up some materials for traps as well. The only question was, what did he need? Iruka strolled through the market, browsing the items for sale and waiting for inspiration to spark. He'd never found it hard to come up with traps. It was all about putting the basics together in new and surprising ways: all you really needed was an imagination and a good grasp of the available materials. Iruka had been an average student in school, but school had been dull: learning techniques the 'proper' way had never sparked his interest the way his traps did.

It was what he liked about seals as well. In school, they'd learnt to use the basic seals, the kind you could buy pre-made in identical, mass-printed batches. But Asuka-sensei had taught him that there was much more to seals than memorising a few symbols. No, you could *combine* the symbols in new and interesting ways. You could modify them, experiment, test the very limits of your imagination. Just as the letters of the alphabet could be combined into millions of words, the base symbols of seals could be strung together into thousands of combinations. The only limit was the seals master's creativity, and Iruka had that in spades.

In the end, Iruka decided to stock up on supplies and then work with whatever he could get. He made a beeline for the stall with the good quality chakra paper, taking a brief detour to swipe a spool of chakra wire, and then hovered nearby, waiting for someone else to approach the seals stall and distract old man Watanabe, the owner, for him

He didn't have to wait long. A woman approached the stall and started asking some very basic questions about how to draw her own seals. Iruka waited until Watanabe had picked up a couple of books on the subject – including a rather nice dictionary for seal symbols that looked thicker than Iruka's own – and then he sauntered over with his hands in his pockets, pretending to glance over the items for sale while moving straight towards the piles of chakra paper on the left of the table.

Iruka picked up a pen with his right hand, examining it while his left hand palmed a few slips of paper – not enough to noticeably diminish the pile – and slipped down to thrust them into his pocket. Easy. He was already planning where to hit next when a hand grabbed his wrist, making him jump and whirl around.

Hound stood behind him, grip still firm on Iruka's wrist. How did he *do* that? Iruka felt his face flush, aware that he'd been caught red-handed.

"Put that back," Hound said. He sounded just as bored as always, as though putting up with Iruka's mere existence was his least favourite chore.

"Let go of me," Iruka snapped. He tried to tug his arm away, but Hound held him with no apparent effort.

Watanabe had noticed them and broken away from his customer.

"Everything all right there?" he asked.

"I'm afraid you've suffered a theft," Hound said, and Watanabe turned to Iruka in shock.

Iruka couldn't meet his eye. He'd bought supplies from Watanabe in the past when he'd managed to scrape some money together. Watanabe wasn't a bad guy, not like some of the stall owners around here; he'd given Iruka discounts sometimes when he'd been short of cash. But discounts could only get him so far, and skipping meals so

he could do his homework hadn't seemed like the greatest plan when there was a way for Iruka to eat *and* practice his seals. He wished Hound had kept this quiet. Couldn't he have lied? Iruka would have given him the papers if only Hound hadn't said anything! Now Watanabe would think he was nothing more than a petty thief, and he *wasn't*, he really wasn't!

"Is that true, Iruka-kun?" Watanabe asked, and Iruka cringed at the disappointment in his voice. "Did you steal something?"

"Either give it back or pay for it," Hound said. He let go of Iruka's wrist but stayed close enough to grab him if he tried to run.

Burning with shame, and aware that several passers-by had noticed the exchange and were watching him with judging eyes, Iruka pulled out the papers and put them back on the pile he'd taken them from.

"Is that all of them?" Hound asked, sounding doubtful, and Iruka sent him a look of poison.

"Yes," he said stiffly, and then yelped as Hound reached into his pocket, checking for himself. "Hey!"

Hound turned to Watanabe, satisfied. "That's everything. You might want to keep an eye on this one. He's a known troublemaker."

"Is that so?" Watanabe said. He was looking at Iruka not with anger, as Iruka had expected, but with hurt. It made Iruka's stomach squirm.

"Apologise," Hound said, and Iruka was furious that he'd dare assume Iruka needed to be told, like a sulking child. Didn't he see that the order took the point out of it? Now if Iruka said sorry, it would sound like he was only saying it because he'd been told to!

It was one humiliation too far. Iruka rounded on Hound, not caring that he had an audience or that Hound was probably a hundred

times stronger than him. He was *sick* of this asshole looking down on him.

“I don’t need you to tell me,” Iruka snapped. “Stop treating me like a child!”

“If you don’t want to be treated like a child then don’t act like a child,” Hound said. “Are you going to apologise or not? Because I have better things to do than teach you how to behave.”

“Then why aren’t you *doing* them?” Iruka asked, loudly enough that people from nearby stalls turned and stared. “No one in this village does what they’re supposed to! I wouldn’t need to steal if someone would let me have more of *my* money but I’ve asked and asked and I still barely get enough to survive on. Why don’t you go scold someone who could actually change that, huh?”

Hound started to speak, but Iruka raised his voice even louder and spoke over him.

“You keep saying it isn’t your job to stop me getting into trouble – well whose job is it then? Because nobody’s doing it! You want me to raise myself and you want to treat me like I’m some dumb kid – you can’t have it both ways, asshole. You think I wanted this? You think I wanted my parents to die?”

“Iruka,” Hound started, but Iruka overrode him again.

“It’s no wonder kids are being snatched off the street. Who’s going to miss them, huh? Certainly not the people who are supposed to protect them.” He prodded Hound hard in his chest plate. “That’s a ‘better thing’ you should be doing. Searching for those kids. So why aren’t you? Why isn’t *anyone*?”

“What’s he talking about?” someone asked. “What missing kids?”

“A few kids ran away from the orphanage,” Hound said. He was still looking at Iruka but speaking straight past him, and Iruka’s self-

control fractured a little more. “We’ve been keeping an eye out for them, but there’s no reason to think that anything bad has happened —”

“They didn’t run away,” Iruka yelled. “They were *taken*. Somebody took them and ANBU isn’t doing anything about it.” He jabbed at Hound again, harder, and this time Hound grabbed his wrist.

“That’s enough, Iruka,” he said. “If you know something about those kids, tell me. If not, stop making a scene.”

“It’s your fault,” Iruka accused, barely knowing what he was saying except that it felt right. “It’s all ANBU’s fault that he’s taking kids. If you didn’t hide behind those stupid masks, he’d take you instead of us!”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Hound asked, voice tight with impatience.

A few of the onlookers glanced up as a second ANBU body flickered onto the street. He ambled over but Iruka barely saw him. Barely saw anything through the flashing brightness of his rage.

“Iruka-kun, is everything all right?” It was Eagle, voice artificially light. “I overheard you from up on the roof. Still worried about those missing kids, huh? Why don’t we find somewhere quieter and you can tell me all about it.”

“Oh, please,” Hound said, exasperated. “You heard him, it’s a bunch of nonsense. He’s doing it for the attention; if you give it to him he’ll only act up more.”

Iruka swung a fist at him. He hadn’t planned to, barely knew where his stillness ended and the violence began. It was a raw, fluid swing, and Hound had to jerk back and smack it away hard with an armoured forearm, the blow jarring Iruka’s bones. It felt good. He cracked his arm out again, but this time Hound grabbed him and twisted, and Iruka cried out in pain as he suddenly found his arm

pressed up behind his back, far enough that he was forced to bend forwards at the waist, his shoulder shrieking. That felt good too.

“That’s *enough*,” Hound said, and there was a sharpness in his tone that Iruka had never heard before. It thrilled him even as he let out a string of the ugliest words he knew. “You’re done, Iruka. I’m taking you home.”

“Do you even know where I live?” Iruka gasped, twisting in his grip and almost wrenching his shoulder from his socket.

“Oh yes,” Hound said grimly. “I made a point of finding out.”

And finally, although Hound didn’t know it, he’d made Iruka feel alive.

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Hound walked Iruka all the way back to his flat, a hand firmly on his shoulder the whole way as if he expected Iruka to make a break for it. Iruka didn’t mind. It meant that he had Hound’s attention for the whole walk home, which he used to talk incessantly about every single one of the children who’d gone missing. Hound let him talk, and Iruka couldn’t tell what he was thinking, or whether he was even listening. He didn’t talk about them because he thought Hound would help, not really, but because the act of listing their names felt like a charm. An invocation to bring them home.

When they reached Iruka’s front door, Hound finally released his grip and watched as Iruka turned the key in the lock.

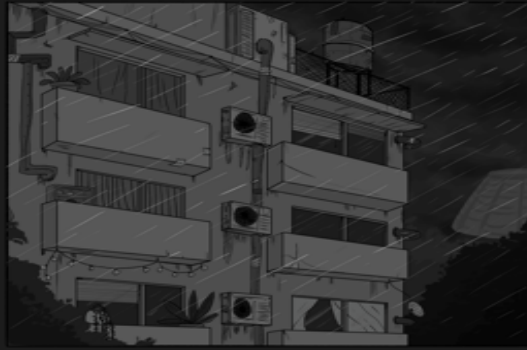
“I’ll find out who you need to talk to about your allowance,” he said, and then he was gone before Iruka could respond.

The flat was empty when he went inside. Mizuki had left a snippy note on the fridge about some chores that needed doing, but Iruka

ignored it and made himself an instant noodle pot that didn't even touch his cavernous pit of hunger. He needed to sort out all the clamouring thoughts speaking over each other in his head, but he was so tired. He couldn't make sense of them right now and wasn't sure he wanted to. The truth he thought he could see was so vast and frightening that he turned away from it, curling up on the couch in his still-damp clothes and drifting into sleep.

When he woke, he felt even more detached from time than after his first nap. A patter of rain was drumming against the glass, and the room was dusky, more shadow than light, yet he didn't feel part of the evening. It might have existed in a different world from where he lay, still half cloaked in dreams. It was so remote and so still that at first he didn't notice the dim figure sitting on the floor and watching him.

"I need to tell you a story," Anko said.



BOOM



"I NEED TO TELL YOU A STORY."



The window was behind her, so none of the pale light fell on her face. Her eyes were very wide and dark, but Iruka couldn't make out the movement of her lips as she spoke. Her voice was pitched low, and Iruka had to strain to hear her over the drumming of the rain.

He sat up slowly. She didn't move but her eyes never left him.

"I have a story too," he said. "Want to hear it?"

There was a beat of stillness and then Anko nodded.

Iruka still felt light-headed from sleepiness, only half in the room and half somewhere else altogether. When he spoke, the words felt like he was dredging them up from a dream.

"Long ago, Death made a bargain with Konoha," he said. "After the first time the kyuubi was used against us, Death saved us. But in return, he wanted to take our strongest warriors to help defend his kingdom in the underworld against the monsters that roamed there. But the first hokage didn't want to give up his ANBU so he made them wear masks and broke the bargain, and since then we've been in debt."

Outside, a gust of wind caught the rain and blew it harder against the windowpane before easing off again. The light was so dim that Iruka couldn't see anything through the glass except the rain-drenched shadows of buildings, hulking and formless, the electric glow from their windows like eyes.

"When the kyuubi came back, Death didn't save us again," Iruka said. "He stood by and he watched, and he took every soul that we owed him, and more, but it wasn't enough. It'll never be enough. Because even now, he can't have the ones he really wants. He can't have ANBU. So instead he went after the children. Maybe because no one will care that we're gone, maybe because he listened to the cries of the dead and learnt our names from our parents. Either way, he's been taking the children back with him to the Land of the Dead."

He took a breath. "Do you see, Anko? The bogeyman isn't a man and he isn't a monster. The bogeyman is Death."

Now he'd said it aloud, Iruka could see the truth in his own tale. It had been there all along, waiting for him to stitch it together. The last of the daylight had vanished while he'd been talking, and it was here in the darkness that he could believe in the being that preyed on the village's children. In the daylight, death was a knife at the throat and a funeral pyre, but here in the shadows he was a long-fingered hand and an all-knowing smile.

"Is that what you think?" Anko asked. Her voice was hoarse and strange. She barely sounded like herself.

"You don't have to believe me," Iruka said. He hadn't expected her to. He was already thinking about what it meant, about what he had to do next. "But I can bring them back. I can bring them all back, I just need to find a way into the underworld. Orochimaru-sensei said there were entrances, but he didn't say *where*."

"I know where the entrance is," Anko said, and Iruka looked at her in surprise.

"How would you know?"

"Because I've been there."

A light flickered on in another window in the apartment block across the street. True night had engulfed the village outside, and even the stars were lost in the bellies of the clouds. Iruka shifted on the sofa, leaning forwards. Anko was little more than a dark shape, so still that she might have been carved from the shadows.

"Tell me your story," Iruka said.

She took a little gulping breath, and he wondered suddenly with alarm if she was crying. When she spoke, her voice was raspy but steady.

“It’s the end of Mizuki’s story,” she said. “Except it wasn’t a girl in the Academy. It was a boy in a quiet street near the training grounds. He was on his way home when the bogeyman – Death – whatever you want to call him – came for him.”

“Who was the boy?” Iruka asked, but Anko kept talking as though she hadn’t heard him.

“He was a smart boy and he’d covered his face, but it didn’t matter. The bogeyman knew him from long ago. He took the boy’s hand and he said, come with me. I can take you to your parents.

“And although the boy was smart, he followed the bogeyman. He followed him out of the village and through the forest and up into the mountains. It was a long walk, and three times he had second thoughts and wanted to go back. The first time, the bogeyman said, but listen, don’t you hear your parents calling? And the boy kept going.

“The second time, the bogeyman said, but listen, don’t you hear your parents crying? And the boy kept going.

“And the third time, the bogeyman held a knife to his neck and said, come with me or I’ll slit your throat. And the boy kept going.”

“But in Mizuki’s story the girl got away,” Iruka said. “That’s where the story came from. She escaped and then told everyone.”

Anko slowly shook her head. “No one escapes from the bogeyman.”

“But you said you’d been to the Land of the Dead. I thought this story would be about you.”

Anko made a sudden harsh sound that made Iruka jump. It might have been a laugh or a sob, or something caught between the two. He half got up off the couch to go to her, but something glinted dully in her lap, and Iruka stilled at the sight of it. She was holding a knife.

She didn't raise it, only rested the flat of the blade on her thigh and watched him as he sank back down onto the couch, mouth dry.

"You have to listen, Iruka," she said. "It's very important that you hear the end of the story."

There was a silence broken only by the rhythmic noise of the rain, and then Anko continued.

"Halfway up the Hokage Mountain there's a river," she said. "The boy and the bogeyman crossed a wooden bridge and followed the path until they reached a standing stone, and then they turned left and threaded through the pines. Not far into the woods, they came to a sloping rock wall where the mountain rises steeply. It was solid and there was nowhere left to go, and the boy was afraid that the bogeyman had brought him here to kill him."

"How do you know all this?" It was barely a whisper. He wasn't sure Anko heard him, but when she spoke again her voice was thick and he knew she was crying.

"There was a symbol carved into the rock, and when the bogeyman touched it, a huge doorway swung open. The cave inside was cold and dark, and it led all the way to the underworld. And I tried to stop him, Iruka, I really tried."

All of Iruka's muscles were taut. She was gripping the knife, hunched over it and sobbing, and he couldn't tell if there was blood on the blade. He could picture it all: the yawning chasm of the cave, the boy in the grip of the monster, and Anko chasing them into the underworld, knife in hand.

"Who was he?" he asked. "Who was the boy?"

Anko made a small noise of great pain but didn't answer. And it struck Iruka suddenly how quiet it was and how dark. At this time of the evening there should have been the clatter of plates from the

kitchenette, the scent of frying meat, and a familiar litany of bitching underpinning it all.

“It was Mizuki,” whispered the shape in the dark. “The bogeyman took Mizuki.”

## Chapter End Notes

As of December 2021 there are two pieces of art in this fic (in this chapter and also chapter 3), both by the amazingly talented [writingdetritus](#), who has kindly allowed me to embed them in the fic. They perfectly capture the vibe of the story and I love them so much <3

## Part III: The Hero and the Hound

### Chapter Notes

Alternatively, this chapter is titled 'Iruka's First Gay Panic'

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Before he left the flat, Iruka crammed his pockets full of seals and shuriken. Anko watched him from the bedroom doorway, no longer sobbing but gaunt and tear-streaked.

“Do you really think you can beat him?” she asked.

“I don’t know, but I have to try.” Iruka shoved a spool of chakra wire in with the seals, the paper crumpling in a way that would have made Asuka-sensei wince. “No one else will believe us. No one’s going to help him, Anko.”

“I know,” she said. “But the bogeyman is strong, Iruka. He’s so much stronger than us.”

“I don’t care. If Sakumo could bring his friends back from the underworld then so can I.”

“Sakumo killed himself,” Anko said.

“Then I’ll have to be smarter than he was,” Iruka said, and Anko barked out a disbelieving laugh.

Iruka ignored her, intent on ransacking Mizuki’s side of the room. He was used to building traps for shinobi much stronger than himself, and although he had yet to catch an ANBU he’d been getting closer recently. The ANBU knew it too. He remembered the way Hound and Eagle had kept to the stairwell when they’d discovered him setting his latest trap. They might have caught him in the act but they hadn’t dared step off the safety of the fire escape.

It wasn't that his traps weren't good enough. It was that he hadn't been setting them in the right places. He hadn't been cunning enough but with Mizuki's life on the line, he'd learn fast. He had to.

He opened a drawer and found Mizuki's stash of bandanas neatly folded alongside his t-shirts. Iruka picked one up, considered it.

"That won't save you," Anko said. "He already knows you. He'll recognise the look in your eyes."

That was true. Iruka had come face to face with Death before. He'd been out on the streets that night when his parents had died and had seen the bodies, bloodied and broken in the wreckage

He put the bandana back in the drawer and closed it.

"Are you coming with me?" he asked.

He wanted her to, desperately. Nothing she could say would dissuade him now, it was too late for that, but he didn't want to go alone. Yet, as Anko hesitated, he knew already that he would have to. The kyuubi had written him a new fate that night, and no matter how he fought against it, he could never get back what it had taken from him.

He would always be alone.

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The gates of Konoha closed at sunset and were opened only to those bearing missions scrolls, whether leaving or returning. But although the night was thick around him – and thicker still beyond the walls and the village lights – Iruka didn't have time to wait. Mizuki didn't have time. He moved quickly through the streets, most empty although he passed the odd hurrying figure caught in the rain or a

couple walking home beneath a shared umbrella. None of them paid Iruka any mind, and soon he passed into the residential district to the east, the streets here emptier, and as he reached the clan compounds near the village gates even the streetlights petered out, the better to confuse invading enemies in the dark.

Iruka stopped only once, in front of the Hatake compound, and only for long enough to brush his fingers against the gate and feel that familiar tingle of chakra. A charm for luck. And then he hurried on through the drizzle, splashing through shallow puddles that reflected nothing, leaving Kakashi's house to be swallowed by the night.

There was light again when he reached the gate. The street opened up, the houses falling away to either side and ending in an open, paved square lit by two lanterns that hung from brackets in the gateposts. The gate itself was made of two large wooden doors built into the village walls, not locked with key or deadbolt but instead enforced with wards so thick that Iruka felt the hair rise on the back of his arms even from where he hid pressed into the wall of the Uchiha compound on the opposite side of the square.

Two chuunin guards stood to one side of the gate, sharing a large black umbrella and talking in low voices. They would have started their shift about an hour before the gates closed for the night, which Iruka estimated to have been perhaps two hours ago. Not as long as he'd have liked – from his observations he'd gathered that the boredom of guard duty really started to sink in at the three hour mark – but it had been long enough that they'd settled into complacency. After all, the war had ended several years ago now and Konoha had no enemies who might storm the village walls. The main duty of the guards in peacetime was to let shinobi in and out at odd hours, and Iruka had spent enough time watching them to know exactly how the gate wards worked.

It was simple really. As a system of defence, the gates were enforced on the *outside* rather than the inside, and therefore while it was difficult to gain entrance to Konoha, the wards weren't designed to stop people from leaving the village. Iruka personally thought this



was an oversight and had said as much to Asuka-sensei when they'd discussed the village defences. All the enemy needed to do, he'd argued, was infiltrate Konoha with a single spy and then they could open the gates in the night and a whole army could flood the streets while Konoha slept. Asuka had given him one of those long looks that meant he'd either said something insightful or something very stupid, and then she'd said that's what the guards were for.

More fool her. Maybe she'd finally upgrade the wards once Iruka was done here tonight.

He pulled a blank sheet of chakra paper out of his pocket, followed by a fountain pen, and then pressed it up against the wall behind him and drew the symbols as elegantly as he could while squinting in the meagre glow that reached his shadowy corner. He blew lightly on the ink to dry it and then pushed a tiny amount of chakra into the paper to activate the seal. The wards on the Uchiha compound wall crackled gently, releasing their own chakra – thick and viscous, oily on the tongue – which was absorbed into the seal without setting off the compound's defences. Iruka didn't take much before he pulled the seal away, severing the connection.

Step one was complete. Step two was just as easy. Iruka backtracked down the street a way, checked to make sure there was no one nearby and then flicked an explosive tag into the air and detonated it, shielding himself from the explosion with a barrier.

The light from the explosion had damaged his night vision even though he'd closed his eyes, but he heard the guards running towards him, one voice calling out but two pairs of footsteps. They'd both left their posts. God, how stupid. He didn't bother to hide, standing in the middle of the street and blinking away the afterimages as they approached.

"Hey, kid," one of them yelled. "What's going on here?"

Iruka didn't bother to reply. His barrier flickered out of existence, only to reappear around the two guards, who were shocked into silence

for a moment before the yelling started again, louder now. Iruka slapped the paper seal against the barrier, leaving it there with enough juice to keep it going for an hour if no one took pity and freed them.

“Hey, it’s that brat,” one of the guards exclaimed, but Iruka didn’t have time to enjoy being recognised. He ran back towards the gate, leaving the guards behind, safely out of the way.

The wards on the gate could be let down by the guards on duty, but they could also be released by the clans who had their compounds near the eastern gate and were therefore the first line of defence against attackers. Iruka had no clan blood in his veins but he didn’t need it, not when he had a seal full of Uchiha chakra he’d just extracted from the compound wards. He pressed the seal against the right spot on the door and, just like that, the wards dissipated. The same trick wouldn’t work from the outside, there were different defences out there. But from inside? Child’s play, at least for anyone who had the nerve.

“Hey! What’s going on out here?”

Iruka didn’t turn at the shout, or at the slam of a door somewhere down the street. The only downside about causing havoc in the middle of a clan neighbourhood was that you couldn’t get away with it for long. He put both hands on one of the doors and pushed hard, the heavy wood creaking as the door grudgingly opened a couple of feet – wide enough for Iruka’s skinny frame. He was halfway through the opening when somebody grabbed his arm.

“Iruka? What on earth are you doing?”

It was Hound. Of course it fucking was. And any second some pissed off clan members would be there too. Iruka tugged his arm sharply but Hound didn’t let him go.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Hound demanded. He sounded bewildered rather than angry.

“To do your job for you,” Iruka snapped. “Let me go.”

Anyone else would probably have shrugged and let him out into the night. After all, who’d really give a damn if Iruka wanted to leave the village? Better off causing trouble out there than in here. Hell, they might not let him back in if he survived the night. But Hound’s grip on his arm was unyielding.

Iruka grabbed a kunai from its holster and slashed at Hound’s wrist, aiming for the soft skin beyond the protection of the armour. Hound jerked back instinctively, letting go, and Iruka slipped out through the gate and raced off into the night.

It was true dark beyond the village walls, darker than Iruka had expected. The drizzle of rain in his eyes only made it harder to see, but he kept running along the road until the trees rose up on his right. A dirt path broke off from the road somewhere near here, winding into the forest, but Iruka couldn’t see the ground clearly enough to tell if he’d already shot past it. He skidded to a halt, stepping into the relative shelter beneath a tree and tugging another sheet of chakra paper from his pocket. This time he could barely see the paper at all and the lines he drew were sloppy – a waste of good chakra paper, Asuka would have said – but when he activated the seal, by some miracle it worked. Not well, but a faint light emitted from the seal, enough to illuminate the ground directly around him if only by a couple of feet. It would do.

Ahead of him, he saw the forest path and took the turning without looking back. It was very quiet out here, more so than he’d expected. In the day, there was birdsong and the scurrying of small creatures in the undergrowth, but perhaps because of the rain there were no sounds tonight beyond the patter of raindrops and his own hurried footsteps slapping against the mud. The trees on either side of him rose up and curved over the path, their branches shielding him from the worst of the rain, though he was already so damp it made little difference.

Beneath his feet, the ground was already sloping uphill. The Hokage Mountain lay just beyond Konoha's walls and the forest sloped up its side, the gradient shallow at first before abruptly rising steeply into rockier terrain. Iruka had climbed to the top of the mountain many times as a child. It had been a favourite walk of his parents, and he knew he could follow at least the first part of Anko's directions. Cross the river halfway up and follow the path until he reached the standing stone. He knew that stone. His father had told him stories about who'd placed it there and why.

But the time for stories was over.

Iruka hadn't got far before a voice called his name. It was so unexpected that his first thought was that Death had come to meet him, and he spun around, heart pounding, expecting to see a long, tall shadow stepping out of the trees.

Instead, the light of his seal glinted off a figure still some way behind him but familiar even at a distance. There was no mistaking that pale, painted mask. It was Hound. He'd followed Iruka out of the village. Iruka was so taken aback that he wasted a precious moment standing frozen and clutching his seal, the light a clear beacon.

"Iruka, stop," Hound called. "It isn't safe out here at night. Wait there."

Iruka turned and fled from the path, straight into the labyrinth of trees. What the hell was Hound doing out here? His plan had relied on the fact that no one would care enough to follow him out of the village. Once he'd made it through the gates, it should have been plain sailing all the way to the underworld. Yet even as he darted through the trees, holding his seal close to his chest to try and hide the light, Hound didn't give up. Iruka could still hear him calling his name, trying to persuade him to stop.

"Whatever's wrong, Iruka, I can help you," Hound promised, his voice muffled by the forest between them but not going away.

“Help by getting off my ass,” Iruka muttered.

It was obvious though that he wasn't going to shake Hound, no matter how much he lost himself among the trees. He couldn't afford to put out the light or he'd only slow himself down. All he was achieving was to take himself further and further from the path, although he made sure to keep moving uphill.

Well, if he couldn't escape Hound's pursuit, he'd have to deal with him another way. All those traps he'd built for ANBU hadn't been time wasted: they'd been practice for exactly this moment. Except this time there wasn't space for failure. This trap needed to achieve what all the others hadn't.

Iruka put on a burst of speed, tearing through the trees until he thought he had enough of a lead to give himself a precious few minutes. All he had was a pocketful of seals, some chakra wire and a few weapons, but Asuka-sensei had long taught him that it wasn't the materials that made a perfect trap: it was the ingenuity of the seals master. Iruka stopped moving, panting from the run, and turned around in a slow circle, daring to hold up the light to take stock of what he had to work with. The trees were spaced fairly widely here, cedars and pines with trunks too thin to hide behind but that stretched up into the sky. The underbrush was sparse and slippery with mud and moss, little foliage but tangling roots that made the ground uneven. The trap had to go in the last place Hound would look. Think, think. And then suddenly Iruka knew exactly what shape the trap would take.

By the time Hound appeared in the dim seal-light, no more than a couple of minutes later, Iruka was prepared and waiting for him. Chakra wire glittered where he'd strung it between the trees, close to the ground, and Hound paused on the far side of it, watching him.

“I thought you might make this difficult,” he said. “You're getting predictable, Iruka.”

“So are you,” Iruka shot back. “Whenever I don’t want you around, you turn up.”

“Someone has to keep an eye on you,” Hound said. He’d ditched his usual exasperated tone, instead making an effort to pretend Iruka wasn’t a huge chore. His voice was carefully neutral, like he was trying to calm a wild animal. Iruka didn’t think it was much of an improvement.

“Why are you following me?” he demanded.

Hound was still keeping his distance but he circled slowly around, searching for a safe way to get to Iruka without setting off any traps hidden in the shadows.

“I can’t let you run off into the night,” Hound said. “Where do you need to be so urgently that it can’t wait until morning?”

“You wouldn’t believe me,” Iruka said.

“This is about those missing kids, isn’t it?” Hound had come to the end of the chakra wire. The path through the trees was uninhibited but he was glancing around, unmoving, aware that Iruka was directing him to the only clear path and trying to figure out what lay in wait for him there.

Before he’d even left the apartment, Iruka had told himself that he wouldn’t tell anyone where he was going or why. He’d given up on waiting for help, or so he’d thought, but now Hound was here, the words bubbled up, unbidden.

“He took Mizuki.”

Hound looked up from scanning the undergrowth, meeting his gaze.

“Who did?”

“The bogeyman!” Iruka threw his hands up in frustration. “Why haven’t you been listening? I’ve told you over and over.”

Hound's eyes dropped again, and he took two careful steps forwards. Nothing happened to impede him.

"Mizuki...he's your friend? The one you live with? Tell me what happened, Iruka, because I don't understand. Did you see someone take him?"

"No, but Anko did." Iruka didn't move as Hound took two more steps towards him. They were separated by perhaps fifteen feet, nothing between them except the mossy ground.

"But she told you instead of coming to ANBU?" Hound said. "And she sent you out alone up the mountain to look for him? That doesn't sound very likely to me. I think your friends are playing a prank on you."

Iruka scoffed, both at the idea that anyone would joke about the bogeyman and that Hound had so much faith in the village kids going to ANBU for help. He'd always suspected that Hound wasn't as old as some of the other operatives – though it was hard to tell with the bulk of the ANBU armour and the way the mask distorted his voice – but he'd never pegged Hound as naïve.

Hound started to take another step forwards, then stopped, gaze on the tree behind Iruka's left shoulder. He'd noticed the seals then.

All of the trees surrounding Iruka had a seal stuck to the bark, some of them more hidden than others. Hound eyed them warily, and Iruka was gratified to see that he was tense.

"What are those?"

"Step a little closer to one and find out."

Even if the light emitting from the seal in Iruka's hand had been brighter, Hound wouldn't have been able to read the symbols on the chakra paper, Iruka was sure. His own jounin-sensei couldn't even draw a simple barrier seal, and from Iruka's experience this was

typical of most shinobi. The higher ranked they were, the less importance they placed on learning even the basics of what were generally considered the soft skills: seals, henges, even medical ninjutsu. More fool them.

“Why don’t we go back to the village,” Hound suggested, “and we can go check up on both your friends. I’m not your enemy, Iruka. If we can’t track Mizuki down, I’ll look for him myself, OK? But I don’t think he’s out here in the woods.”

This was why Iruka hadn’t wanted to tell anyone. No matter how loudly he shouted, no matter how many times he asked for help, no one heard him. Even when they told him they were listening, they were lying. His words were no more than candle flames, easily smothered, and he felt the suffocation now as Hound tried to extinguish them. He thought he could douse Iruka’s drive with his own disbelief, but he was wrong. Even the smallest flame, if kindled, could burn the whole village down.

“You’re right, he’s not in the woods,” Iruka snapped. “You want to know what happened to him? What happened to those missing kids? Death took them! That’s what happened! He came and took them back to the Land of the Dead with him.”

Hound dared two more slow steps, his eyes on the seals. He was paying them more attention than anything Iruka said.

“You’re saying someone killed them?” he asked.

“No! I mean Death, the literal god of the underworld, came into Konoha and took them back with him.”

“I wish you’d stop talking nonsense,” Hound said, and he was getting frustrated now too. “I can’t understand what you’re trying to tell me. Stop speaking in fairytales and tell me one thing: do you think those children are dead?”



Iruka opened his mouth to snap back and then paused. Did a living person die when they entered the underworld? Was the difference between the living and the dead merely a matter of geography? Images flashed before him again of the bodies he'd seen on the night of the kyuubi. Did Mizuki look like that now, his body in tatters, blood seeping through his torn edges?

The light juddered, sending shadows flickering over the trees, and Iruka realised his hands were shaking. He clamped them together to try to keep them still, glaring at them.

"They're not dead," he said loudly. "But even...even if they are, I can bring them back. I'll bring them all back, you'll see."

Hound came closer, watching, waiting.

"Has someone hurt those kids?" he asked. "Do you know something? Is that why you're out here? If you're in trouble, you need to tell me."

"I've *told* you," Iruka said. God, he was so tired of being angry. "I've told you and told you and nobody's listening!"

There was so little space between them now that if each of them stretched out an arm they could touch, but neither of them did.

"I'm trying to listen," Hound insisted. "But you keep telling me stories instead of the truth."

"They are the truth," Iruka yelled. "Death took them. He took them because of your stupid masks, because you wouldn't let him take you instead. It's all ANBU's fault, all of this, because he wants you and you're too scared to show him your faces."

Hound lunged forwards and grabbed him by his upper arms.

"Those are legends!" he said. "Iruka, goddamnit, you're too old to believe in these stories! Who's been filling your head with this crap?"

When I find out, I – fuck!”

Iruka had grabbed a knife from his holster and Hound jerked back – or tried to. His hands were still wrapped around Iruka’s biceps, even as he tried to tug them away, stuck fast. Iruka pressed the blade to his throat and Hound stopped trying to free himself.

“You little shit,” he breathed. “You trapped *yourself*?”

Iruka’s heart was racing and his hand was still wracked by tiny tremors, but the knife held steady at Hound’s throat, pressing lightly against the skin. Finally, Hound had stopped glancing at all his distractions. His gaze was trained wholly on Iruka, close enough that Iruka could see that only one of his eyes was open – and open wide. Iruka let the light-emitting seal flutter from his hand to land at their feet, the angle of the shadows changing and plunging Hound’s eyeholes into darkness. That damn mask looked sinister in this light and he raised a hand, gripped the porcelain.

“Do I have your attention yet?”

Hound’s hands jerked again, uselessly, as Iruka tugged the mask away from his face. Only to reveal a different kind of mask. And as they finally locked eyes, face to face, Iruka’s breathing stuttered in his throat.

“Yes, Iruka,” Kakashi said. “You have my attention.”

"DO I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION YET?"



"YES IRUKA. YOU HAVE MY ATTENTION."

It was him. It couldn't be him, Iruka would have *known* if Hound had been Kakashi all this time. And yet somehow, for all his careful watching, he'd missed this. He felt his cheeks flush, aware suddenly that those were *Kakashi's* hands on his arms, that was *Kakashi's* chest inches from his own, and the knowledge of who that body belonged to changed the whole scene before him. Not only this scene; a hundred memories were suddenly washed with different colours. His face burned with humiliation and anger and something else he couldn't quite name but that suffused his whole body and made his head swim.

"You know my name," he said, stupidly. "I mean, you...you knew who I was but you never..."

"Never said anything?" Kakashi finished. He raised one slim eyebrow. "It wouldn't be much of a secret identity if I had, now would it? Though I thought you'd already suspected. Why else would you follow me around?"

Oh God, he *knew*. All this time, he'd known Iruka was trailing him like a lost puppy, and now he was looking at Iruka like he expected him to explain why. But Iruka didn't know why. He just needed to be where Kakashi was, to hear his voice, to whisper his name like a charm to protect him from evil. But he couldn't have put that into words under the most exquisite of tortures, and certainly couldn't right now, with his knife pressed to the soft hollow of Kakashi's throat.

"It doesn't matter," he said, mouth dry. "I don't have time for this. I have to save Mizuki." He focused his gaze on the point of his knife, avoiding Kakashi's face. He didn't know if he'd be able to do this if he looked directly at him. "Walk backwards until I tell you to stop."

Kakashi didn't move. "Don't make any more trouble for yourself. Taking my mask crossed a line, you know that. But if you let me go, we can keep it between the two of us. No one else has to know."

Iruka closed his eyes, steeled himself. "I don't want to hurt you," he said. "Please don't make me."

He must have sounded more desperate than he thought, because Kakashi obeyed. He took small, careful steps backwards, letting Iruka steer him slightly to the left, until his back hit the trunk of a cedar.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Now I'm going to set your hands free," Iruka said, "and you're going to press them back against the tree."

He watched understanding dawn in Kakashi's one open eye, and felt him try to pull away from the tree trunk, only to realise he was now stuck fast.

"What are these seals?" he asked. "I've never seen them before."

"They're called spiderweb seals," Iruka said. "I didn't know if they'd work if I used one on myself, but I guess it does." He dropped Hound's mask so he could reach for the seal he'd stuck to his own back earlier. "Don't try anything," he said. "Hands against the tree or I'll slit your throat."

"No you won't," Kakashi said softly.

But when Iruka deactivated the seal, Kakashi uncurled his fingers very slowly from Iruka's arms and raised his hands above his head, pressing his wrists against the tree. Only when Iruka was sure they were stuck to the wood did he lower the knife and take a step back.

His hands were no longer shaking but his heart was hammering against his ribcage. He'd finally done it. He'd captured an ANBU. So why didn't he feel the triumph he was due? Instead all he could think of was how he'd have to leave Kakashi here helpless and trapped in the woods, and he would have to go on with his mission alone.

“What are you going to do now?” Kakashi asked.

“I have to find Mizuki,” Iruka said. “But I’ll come back for you.”

“You really think someone’s taken those kids, don’t you?” Kakashi asked. “I wish you’d let me help you, Iruka. You don’t have to do this alone.”

Even without his ANBU mask, his face was still covered and Iruka couldn’t read his expression. He was tempted to pull down Kakashi’s cloth mask as well – he’d imagined what Kakashi looked like so many times that he’d dreamt about it – but he didn’t dare. If Death was out here roaming the woods then that mask might be the only thing protecting Kakashi.

“I’m always alone,” Iruka said. But he hesitated to leave. The thought of walking off into the forest without Kakashi was not a pleasant one. But he had to. He had to.

“At least give me my mask back,” Kakashi said.

Kakashi’s ANBU mask still lay on the ground and Iruka bent and picked it up, turning it over in his hands. It was lighter than it looked, but it felt strong enough. Of course it was – it was a magical item, protection against Death himself. Protection that Iruka sorely needed right now.

He raised it to his own face, fitting it securely in place with the strap. The porcelain was cool against his skin, not entirely comfortable but the fit was close enough. This was the mask that kept Kakashi safe. Now Kakashi would, in a way, keep Iruka safe too.

“Sorry,” he said. “I need it more than you do.” Kakashi tugged his wrists in frustration, but they didn’t budge from their place against the tree. “I don’t know how soon I’ll be back, but the seal will run out of chakra in a few hours,” Iruka said. “You won’t be stuck there forever, even if I don’t...if I’m held up.”

“Iruka, you don’t have to do this,” Kakashi said urgently. “Listen to me. Those stories aren’t real. I know you’ve been through a lot and you’re frightened, but if there’s really a danger out there, that mask won’t protect you.”

Iruka ignored him and picked up the light-emitting seal. It had got even duller, or perhaps the night looked darker from the eyes of an ANBU. He felt bad about having to leave Kakashi in the dark, but it was better that way. The shadows offered their own protection, hiding everything they covered.

“I can help you,” Kakashi said, speaking faster now. “You don’t have to be alone. Let me go and we can search anywhere you like. Together.”

Despite himself, Iruka’s stomach flipped. He wanted Kakashi to go with him, to save him, he wanted it so badly he could have wept. But he’d got used to wanting things he couldn’t have.

“I’ll come back for you,” he promised again, and then he turned and started running, leaving Kakashi alone in the pitch-black night. And although Kakashi called after him, Iruka didn’t turn back.

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It took a while to find the path again. Although it was easy enough to tell direction because of which way the ground sloped, it was difficult to travel in a straight line when the trees all looked the same. More than once, Iruka thought he’d truly lost his way, and he had to clamp down on his panic and use the adrenaline to drive him onwards further and faster. When he finally stumbled onto the dirt track, he felt almost faint with relief.

The mask made his breathing loud and his face warm, and he couldn’t stop touching it. It made him feel safer, even as he finally

reached the river and his nerves jangled at the sight of it. The water was black in the darkness but he could tell from the rush that it was swollen from days of rain. The bridge was slippery, but he made it across and carried on uphill, the slope becoming steeper.

Not far beyond the riverbank, he reached the standing stone: a large, oblong stone taller than a full-grown man, carved with symbols so faded with time that they could no longer be interpreted. Iruka's father had said it was an ancient thing, though his stories changed each time they passed. Once it was the grave of a giant, another time a shrine to the god of the mountain, or else a marker to commemorate a long-forgotten battle. Iruka wondered now if it marked the boundary to Death's territory, and he paused beside it, feeling a shiver of trepidation slink along his spine.

The woods were denser here. Anko had told him to leave the path and turn left into the trees. They were very tall, looming over him and stretching onwards until they became a solid shadow, like the forest itself were a hulking creature with pines like teeth and a belly full of the dead. Iruka stood at the edge of the path, gazing into its maw.

*Iruka.* His name, breathed somewhere beneath the sound of the rain, so faint he wasn't sure if he'd really heard it. Behind him, he'd been conscious of the bulk of the standing stone, still at his back, but now he thought the shape he sensed there might be something else. The shape of a different tall presence, watching him, smiling, waiting for him to turn around.

*Iruka.* This time he was sure of it: someone, or something, had said his name. It sounded like it came from far away, muffled like a distant echo, but he thought he felt a puff of cold breath on the shell of his ear. Behind him, a long, thin arm reached out for him, he was sure of it, he could see it in his mind's eye and yet his neck had gone rigid, unable to turn, his breath coming short and fast and puffing up the inside of the mask.

*Iruka.* The third time was closer, clearer, and Iruka finally unstuck himself and shot into the forest, muscles shrieking as he pumped his



legs, running clumsily and bouncing off trees, smacking branches and leaping or stumbling over tree roots, but he couldn't stop, *would not stop*, because Death was on his heels and Iruka was both in the woods and back in Konoha tearing through the streets, searching for his parents, for Mizuki, a monster grinning with their blood on its teeth somewhere just out of sight.

"Iruka! Where are you?"

A human voice, so real that Iruka faltered, lost for a moment between the past and present, and then he tripped and fell sprawling onto the hard ground.

"Iruka!"

It was Kakashi's voice. Faint, but much closer than it should have been. Iruka picked himself up, wincing at a pain in his leg. He thought he might have gashed himself open on a rock but he didn't stop to check. He'd dropped the light-bearing seal into a puddle, and as the paper absorbed the water, it flickered and died.

"Shit! No!"

He scrambled for it even though he knew it was hopeless, but in the dark he couldn't even find the sodden piece of paper. Behind him, Kakashi was still calling his name, and although it was hard to tell direction or distance with the trees and the rain muffling the sound, Iruka thought he was getting closer. Fuck. He must have escaped from the trap somehow. Maybe Iruka hadn't put enough chakra into the seal, or maybe the rain had damaged that one too. Either way, Kakashi hadn't given up, and Iruka needed to reach the underworld before Kakashi had a chance to stop him.

He stumbled onwards without the light. It was much harder, and he was no longer certain of his direction. Had he been going uphill or downhill when he'd left the path? He'd been so frightened that he hadn't paid attention, and now he could only keep moving and hope he wasn't going in circles. He felt suddenly very young, like a child

who'd lost his way. The thought struck him that his parents would be frantic with worry, and then he remembered that no, they were dead, they wouldn't come searching for him no matter how deep he ventured into the gullet of the mountain.

But if he made it to the Land of the Dead, perhaps he could search for them.

He came upon the cliff so suddenly he almost ran into it. The trees grew right up to the wall of rock, which stretched up above them, vanishing into the darkness. Iruka pressed one hand against the stone, bending forwards to take huge, gasping breaths, his legs burning as they recovered from the sprint. He'd done it! He'd made it to the entrance. This had to be the right place. Now he only needed to figure out how to open it.

Kakashi had stopped calling, but Iruka didn't doubt that he was still tracking him, so he had to move fast. What had Anko said? That the bogeyman had touched a symbol carved into the rock and the doorway to the underworld had opened. Iruka squinted at the rock but could barely see what was right in front of his face. How was he meant to find a symbol – and he didn't even know what it was supposed to look like – in the dark like this? He had more chakra paper, but he couldn't manage to draw another seal here. It was too wet and too dark. Desperately, he began to run his hands over the rock face instead, blindly seeking something that felt unnatural. But the rock wasn't smooth under his hands: the surface was uneven and rough, and he didn't even know what he was looking for! It could be right in front of him and he'd never know.

He'd formed a fist, ready to strike the rock wall in frustration, when he felt it. A spark of chakra, as small as a lit match in the dark, but there. Close. Iruka was by no means a sensor, but it was easier out here in the forest without other shinobi around to cast such a background glow that it drowned out the smaller flickers. Iruka closed his eyes and concentrated. Yes, there it was, a small flame of chakra, somewhere to his left. Not enough to be a person, but perhaps the amount stored in a charged seal. With his eyes still shut,

Iruka took slow steps towards it, shutting out all distractions, keeping one hand on the cliff to guide his steps until the source of the chakra was right in front of him.

He dragged his fingers lightly over the damp stone, up to head height, and then he found it. There were lines scored into the rock. Not the uneven striations of erosion, but clean, consistent ridges that had been made by a person – or something like a person. Iruka opened his eyes and peered through the gloom but the night was too thick and he couldn't make it out. He frowned, closed his eyes again and traced the lines with his finger, trying to picture how they fit together, using both hands.

Oh! It was a kanji, roughly the size of the palm of his hand. Once he'd realised that, it was simple enough to read it with his fingers; it said simply: open.

Anko had said the bogeyman had touched the symbol and the entrance to the underworld had opened. Well, Iruka was touching it but nothing had happened. So he did the most natural thing a shinobi would do: he pushed some of his own chakra into the stone.

The ground rumbled, and he hurriedly took a few steps back, tensed and ready to dodge, but no trap tried to ensnare him. It was hard to make out at first what was happening, but then he realised a section of the cliff was sinking into the ground. He could just about make out the movement. And then it all went still.

Iruka waited for a breathless moment to see if anyone – or anything – would emerge from the mouth of the cave, but there were no signs of life. From somewhere in the woods he heard the sound of his name again, closer now, but he ignored it. Kakashi couldn't make this journey with him. Death would never let him leave. Iruka adjusted the ANBU mask over his face, tried and failed to calm his pounding heart, and stepped forwards with more confidence than he really felt.

The opening to the cavern was even darker than the forest. Iruka paused at the threshold, holding his breath and listening closely, trying to sense if there was something inside. Someone could be standing a metre away and he'd never have known. The blackness was impenetrable. Hesitantly, he reached a hand out in front of him, half-expecting to feel the firmness of flesh.

"Hello?" he whispered.

Nothing responded, not even an echo, but a faint light glimmered into life further down the passageway as if the cave itself had heard him. Iruka kept one hand out in front of him and stretched the other out to the side until his fingers brushed the wall – it was unnaturally smooth under his hands, and dry to the touch. Then he took his first hesitant steps into the cave.

He jumped as the ground shook under him again, and he turned in time to see the rock rising back into place, cutting him off from the outside world. The last thing he heard was Kakashi's muffled voice, calling for him in the lonely forest. It was gratifying to know that Kakashi hadn't given up – that he cared enough to look for Iruka, although whether that concern was for Iruka's wellbeing or his own wounded pride, Iruka wasn't sure. It didn't matter. Either way, he'd got what he wanted. Kakashi knew his name. He was the one seeking out Iruka for once, and Iruka tucked that small happy thought away in a safe place to give him strength during his journey.

The ground beneath him was as unnaturally smooth as the walls, perfectly level and sloping gently downwards. The air was cold, and Iruka's damp clothes clung to him unpleasantly, making him shiver. It was so dark that he couldn't see his own feet, and he made slow progress, carefully feeling his way towards the distant glow. It was hard, without sight, to tell how far away it was, and Iruka wasn't sure if he wanted the walk to be over with quickly or take a long time. He was both anxious to find Mizuki as soon as possible, but he was also very aware that he was all alone now. There was no way for Kakashi to find him. He didn't even know about the symbol on the rock, and he'd likely give up the search when he realised there was no trace of

Iruka to be found. If things went wrong, Iruka would be just one more lost child, abandoned and forgotten.

But he wouldn't let that happen.

The closer he got to the glow, the more his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Soon he could make out the size of the cave: twice the height of a grown man and wide enough for four people to walk shoulder to shoulder. A passage designed for creatures much larger than a human. More than once, Iruka thought he heard something behind him: a single footstep, or a sigh. But whenever he turned back to squint into the darkness, there was nothing treading in his footsteps, or nothing the pale light reached. Regardless, he quickened his steps.

After several minutes of walking – he couldn't tell how many, time seemed to flow differently here – he realised the passage curved to the right and around the corner lay the source of the light. Iruka slowed down, straining his ears to try and hear if there was anyone there waiting, but everything was silent. The sound of the rain had vanished when the entrance had closed behind him, and the only thing he could hear was his own breathing, amplified by the ANBU mask.

Iruka pressed himself against the wall, grabbed a barrier seal just in case, and then took a deep breath and rounded the corner, stepping into the light.

## Chapter End Notes

The art in this chapter is once again by the amazing [writingdetritus](#).

The wonderful, talented Rei has also drawn some fanart for this scene. It's gorgeous and moody and absolutely perfect so please [check it out on her tumblr here](#).

## Part IV: The Boy Who Built Traps for Gods

### Chapter Notes

This chapter is a bit of a monster so I suggest you grab some snacks, make yourself a drink and settle in for a good long read.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The stone passageway widened into a large room, hewn from the rock. There was furniture: metal shelves lined with glass vials and jars, long tables that bore scientific equipment – microscopes, petri dishes, long lines of syringes and scalpels – and even light fixtures attached to the ceiling, the wires taped to the wall where they snaked down towards an unseen generator that whirred quietly in the background.

Iruka hesitated in the entrance, and then stepped inside, looking around in confusion. He'd had only a vague idea of what the underworld would look like but the images in his mind had been cavernous underground cities, miles wide, or uncanny landscapes populated by hulking, shadowy beasts. This wasn't right. Wherever he was, it wasn't the underworld. The knowledge gathered in his gut, heavy and foreboding.

"Mizuki?" he called.

There was a doorway leading out of the room on the other side, barred not by a door but by strong wards that shimmered like a heatwave in the threshold. Whatever lay beyond was hidden by darkness but Iruka thought he heard a muffled sound from the other side, so faint it could have been his own wishful thinking. But he'd come this far, and no matter where he was or what was really happening here, he had to keep going. Mizuki was waiting for him. All the missing children were.

If they were still alive.

He approached the doorway, intent on feeling out the wards and searching for a weak spot, but stopped halfway across the room, nerves suddenly tingling. It was the same feeling he'd had in the passageway, of being watched, but there was nobody else in the room with him. Was someone obscured in the shadows on the other side of the wards, watching him, waiting?

No. The prickling sensation was on the back of his neck as though that's where the phantom gaze was boring into him. Iruka stood very still. He could sense nothing, hear nothing. But he knew. Something had been in the dark passage with him. Something was standing behind him and waiting for him to notice it.

Slowly, he turned around.

Orochimaru stood in the entrance from the passage, opposite Iruka. His eyes were very bright and his smile was very wide.

"Very impressive, Iruka-kun," he said. "You're the first person who's found your way here. I'd hoped you would."

Iruka's hand jerked towards his kunai holster but stopped before he touched the knife, uncertain. His heart rate was spiking and his instincts were blaring that there was danger, but this was Orochimaru-sensei – Anko's teacher. A sannin of Konoha. He couldn't possibly be...he *couldn't* be...

"Are you the bogeyman?" Iruka blurted out, hand still not quite on the handle of his knife.

Orochimaru hadn't moved. His hands were relaxed and open by his sides, no weapon in sight, although that meant nothing.

"What will you do if I am?" he asked.

It was a very good question, one Iruka wished he had an answer to. He hadn't had much of a plan to begin with, he was realising now.

Go to the underworld, find Mizuki, save him. That wasn't a plan! He'd missed the crucial element – the *how*.

Orochimaru was waiting patiently for him to answer, sharp eyes never leaving Iruka's masked face. Perversely, it was the first time an adult had truly listened to him. The first time anyone had so genuinely wanted to know what he had to say. And for the first time Iruka was glad of the mask because he realised now that Mizuki and Anko had been right: being seen was dangerous. Staying hidden was safe.

But it was too late to undo the damage. He could only do what he'd come here to do, one way or another.

He straightened, standing as tall as he could, and wrapped his hand around the hilt of the kunai, though he didn't draw it yet.

"I'm here to take Mizuki back," he said. "And everyone else you took."

"And what if I won't let you?" Orochimaru asked. He was dangerous, Iruka knew that, so far out of Iruka's league that it was laughable to compare them. Yet there was no trace of violent intent in the way Orochimaru held himself. Iruka sensed only lazy amusement and insatiable curiosity.

"Then I'll take them anyway," Iruka said with more bravado than he felt, and Orochimaru laughed with delight.

"Not just clever but *brave*," he said. "Or maybe drunk off a previous victory. Tell me, Iruka-kun, how did you get that mask?"

"I trapped an ANBU," Iruka said, and flinched when Orochimaru clapped his hands together.

"You are exactly what I've been searching for," he breathed, and for a moment his expression slipped and he was staring at Iruka with naked hunger before he smoothed it over again. Iruka's skin



crawled. “But first, tell me – does the ANBU know where you are? Where did you leave him?”

“In the woods.” Iruka lifted his chin defiantly. “He’s looking for me. He’ll find me – and you.”

Orochimaru gave a little sigh. “Your trap could have been better then,” he said. “But of course, you still have a lot to learn. I, on the other hand, have had a very long time to become good at what I do, and believe me when I say that no matter how hard your ANBU looks, he won’t find this cave.”

“I got in,” Iruka argued. “If I can do it, so can he!”

Orochimaru cocked his head to one side. “I let you in,” he said. “And locked the door behind you.”

Oh. Iruka hadn’t considered before now that he couldn’t leave. His gaze slipped past Orochimaru to the passageway behind him. Orochimaru finally moved, stepping further into the room so he could gesture back the way Iruka had come.

“By all means, try to leave,” he said. “I can wait.”

Iruka’s first thought was that it had to be a trap, but then he realised no, he was *already caught in the trap*. He’d walked right in through the entrance like an idiot and now there was no way out. Fuck, had he just become one of the missing kids?

“What do you want with me?” he asked.

Orochimaru came forwards another couple of steps and Iruka hastily backed away. The room wasn’t large but he wanted to keep as much distance between them as possible.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Orochimaru said. “I’m not going to hurt you. That would be such a waste. It isn’t every day I find a child with your talents, after all.”

“My talents?” Iruka echoed. “I’m not talented. I’m just good at traps. That’s all.” He was no Kakashi. No child prodigy. He was average except when it came to causing trouble. The most anyone had ever said about him was that he ‘had potential’, and even that was given grudgingly and with the caveat that he’d never realise this mythical potential if he didn’t stop building ANBU traps and step into line.

Orochimaru came closer slowly, as though approaching a feral creature, and Iruka clutched the knife so hard his fingers hurt. He stepped backwards until he bumped into one of the metal tables, and then he held up the knife. Orochimaru’s gaze never left Iruka’s face but when he stepped into striking range he grabbed Iruka’s wrist, casually, and squeezed in a way that made Iruka’s fingers spasm. The knife clattered to the floor. With his other hand, he grasped the ANBU mask, much like Iruka had done when he’d taken it from Kakashi, and slid it carefully off over Iruka’s head and placed it down on the table.

“Talents and a pretty face,” he mused, cupping Iruka’s jaw and tilting his head up, and Iruka felt a shiver of revulsion he couldn’t quite articulate. He leaned back, and Orochimaru’s fingers left his face with a softness that was almost a caress.

“As a teacher, I’ve given a lot of thought to what makes the best students,” Orochimaru said. “And the children I want aren’t those with the most strength or chakra. They might be brilliant but in a very boring way. No, bring me the children who’ve seen the worst of this world and survived. The ones who watch every shadow, who have an exit plan for every room, who hear the quietest bumps in the night. Bring me the children who believe in monsters, and I will make monsters out of them.”

His voice was very calm, almost soothing, but he was still gripping Iruka’s wrist and had him cornered against the table.

“What are you going to do to me?” Iruka asked.

“I’m going to teach you, of course,” Orochimaru said. “Anko has been a good student but lately she’s been...slipping. She needs a friend, and I need a second apprentice. There’s so much work to be done, and frankly you’re wasted on your current genin team.”

Iruka blinked up at him, struggling to understand what he was saying.

“You didn’t take those other kids to teach them,” he said, fearing this was some kind of trick. Just another part of the trap. “Where are they? What are you doing down here?” He gestured around the room.

“What does it look like?” Orochimaru asked.

Iruka glanced at a microscope near him on the table.

“A...laboratory?”

“Yes, exactly.” Orochimaru finally let go of Iruka’s wrist and took a step back. “You’re studying seals, you must be aware that we haven’t yet discovered the limitations of the shinobi arts. Just as there are so many more seals constantly being developed, those of us with scientific inclinations are curious about the nature of chakra and the uses it can be put to. Unfortunately, much of the truly ground-breaking work has been labelled forbidden knowledge and locked away by those too ignorant to see the possibilities.” He made a contemptuous gesture. “Down here beyond the prying eyes of the village, I can do what is necessary to get the work done.”

Iruka didn’t know exactly what he was alluding to. He had a vague idea of how new jutsus were created, but he wasn’t sure that’s what Orochimaru was working on. Asuka-sensei had taught him the basics about how new seals were made and none of what he’d learnt required a lab, only the right books of theory and a creative mind.

“But why would you need kids for that?” he asked.

Orochimaru strode across the room, beckoning Iruka to follow him. Iruka glanced at where his knife had fallen, then dared to quickly bend down and grab it.

“That won’t do you much good,” Orochimaru said, not even looking up from the shelf he was perusing. “Hold onto it if you like but don’t make me disarm you a second time or I might feel the need to teach you a lesson.”

Iruka hesitated, knife in hand, and then slid it back into the holster. There might be chance to use it later but he wasn’t fool enough to try anything now. Orochimaru snapped on a pair of disposable latex gloves and selected a clean petri dish from the shelf, which he carried over to a machine on one of the tables. The machine reminded Iruka of a rice cooker, but when Orochimaru lifted the lid, it revealed a circle of test tubes, each stoppered and vibrating gently in its holder. Iruka had never seen anything like it, and despite himself he gravitated closer, watching as Orochimaru selected a test tube, half full of what looked like red liquid, and picked up a long piece of plastic with a loop at the end. As a child, Iruka had blown bubbles through something similar, although this version was longer and the loop too small to make decent bubbles.

“Have you ever wondered why some families have bloodline limits and others don’t?” Orochimaru asked. He dipped the loop down into the test tube and then streaked it onto the petri dish, leaving a red smear.

“Something to do with genes?” Iruka guessed.

“Something like that,” Orochimaru agreed, dipping the loop back into the test tube. “And the thing about genes is that they can be manipulated. If we researched the genetic code of these families, we could recreate their abilities. Change them. *Improve* them.”

There was a microscope beside the test tube machine, and Orochimaru slid the petri dish under the lens and bent over to peer into it, turning a knob on the side until he was satisfied. Then he

stepped back and gestured for Iruka to take a look. Iruka hesitated but then pressed his own eyes to the microscope. What he saw didn't make much sense to him.

"It's lots of tiny blobs," he said doubtfully.

"Those tiny blobs are Uchiha cells."

Iruka jerked away from the microscope and looked up at Orochimaru with wide eyes.

"How did you get them?"

Orochimaru just smiled.

Iruka picked up the petri dish and looked at the red smears on the glass. It didn't look like blood, not quite, but he couldn't help but think of it.

"None of the kids you took are from the clans," he said. "They're just...nobodies. So if you're interested in bloodline limits, why would you need ordinary kids?"

While he'd been examining the petri dish, Orochimaru had moved smoothly behind him, and now he leaned a hand on the table on each side of Iruka, trapping him against it from behind. Iruka tensed as Orochimaru bent his head down to Iruka's ear, his hair brushing Iruka's neck.

"There are so many things you can do with a few cells," he murmured. "I could take a sample from you and grow a whole new child. I could replicate your cells, mutate them, create something monstrous or something beautiful."

Iruka tried very hard to ignore the warmth he could feel against his back. They weren't quite touching, and he didn't dare move in case that brought them into contact.

"You didn't answer my question," he said.

“If you could choose to have a bloodline limit, Iruka-kun – would you?” Orochimaru asked.

Iruka was still holding the petri dish and he stared at it hard to try and block out the man looming over him.

“Which one?”

“Whichever one you like. Take your pick.”

He thought of Kakashi and his sharingan eye. The eye he hadn’t been born with – was that what Orochimaru was talking about? Could he use those Uchiha cells to grow an eye with the sharingan? Could he transplant it into an ordinary shinobi’s face?

“Oh.” The noise came out softly, little more than a sigh. “You’re... changing them. The kids. You’re giving them bloodline abilities.”

“So smart,” Orochimaru breathed. He straightened and rested his hands on Iruka’s shoulders. “That’s certainly my aim, although there is still much work to be done. A new technique always takes time to perfect but the results have been improving.”

Iruka almost asked what that meant – what had happened to the children who’d been experimented on, why Orochimaru had needed so many – but he didn’t have the courage. Didn’t want to know. There was only one question he still needed to answer.

“Where’s Mizuki?”

“Would you like to see him?”

Iruka was so surprised that he turned around, regretting it instantly as he found himself face to face with Orochimaru, only inches between them.

“Can I?”

Orochimaru smiled. “Oh yes. He’s not a test subject, don’t worry. He’s perfectly fine.”

He finally backed off, leading the way over to the warded doorway and raising his hand to it, taking down the wards. Iruka hung back, keeping his distance. Orochimaru disappeared through the doorway and a light came on inside, followed immediately by a familiar voice.

“Let me out of here, you bastard!”

“Mizuki!” Iruka forgot his wariness and ran straight through into the next room, right past Orochimaru, who’d been waiting near the door, and he felt the wards go up again as soon as he’d passed through. He couldn’t bring himself to care.

This room was much larger than the last one. It was twice the size of Iruka’s whole apartment – although that wasn’t saying much – but unlike the last room it was almost entirely bare of furniture. Unless you counted the cages.

There were ten cages in total, five on each side of the room, up against the wall in two neat rows. Each was about five feet tall and long enough for a child to lie down in, the bars reinforced with seals. Mizuki was in the cage on the right closest to the door, standing up with his hands pressed against the bars and staring at Iruka in despair.

There were other children in the rest of the cages, but all of them were lying very still under blankets patterned with animals and cartoon characters, even their faces covered like shrouded corpses. They didn’t so much as stir even as Mizuki said Iruka’s name loudly enough for it to echo off the stone walls. Iruka couldn’t tell if they were alive or dead.

“Don’t worry,” Orochimaru said softly when he saw Iruka staring. “They’re only sleeping.”

“He drugged them,” Mizuki said. He tried to reach a hand out between the bars and then jerked back as though he’d been burnt. Iruka hurried over to him, glancing at the seals. There was a barrier symbol in there, and lightning, but his mind was too jumbled for him to unpick the rest of the meaning. It was enough to stop him from trying to touch but he stood as close as he dared and stared into the cage in horror.

“Are you OK?” he asked.

He was almost relieved when Mizuki stared at him like he was an idiot. It was comfortingly familiar.

“Iruka, I’ve been kidnapped by a mad scientist, what do you think?” Mizuki asked.

“Maybe that was a stupid question,” Iruka admitted. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” Mizuki said. His eyes flicked past Iruka to Orochimaru and back again. “Damn it, Iruka, if you were going to come running in here, you couldn’t have brought some help?” He lowered his voice. “Please tell me you told one of your ANBU friends where this place is.”

“I...” Iruka faltered and felt his face heat. If he’d really been smart, like Orochimaru seemed to think, he’d have repeated Anko’s directions to Kakashi but he hadn’t. Instead he’d done everything possible to keep Kakashi from following him. Even if Kakashi managed to track him through the woods, the trail would end at a solid cliff face with no clues as to where Iruka had gone. Kakashi wouldn’t spot the symbol carved into the rock in the darkness and he certainly wouldn’t be able to open the door. Iruka’s chakra hadn’t activated it, he realised that now. Orochimaru had been waiting for him, and when Iruka had found the entrance, he’d simply let him in.

Mizuki read his failure on his face and let out a noise that was part groan part growl.



“Now, now,” Orochimaru soothed, crossing the room to stand by them, as though he felt he’d left them alone for long enough to be polite. “It isn’t so bad in here. I’ve treated you well.”

“He’s crazy,” Mizuki said, voice tight. “Iruka, the things he’s done to the other kids…” He trailed off, and his Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. “Some of them are already dead.”

“That won’t happen to you,” Orochimaru said, still in that comforting tone.

“Then why did you bring him here?” Iruka asked. “If you don’t want to hurt him, let him go!”

Orochimaru gave a soft sigh and shrugged helplessly. “I can’t do that. You see, Iruka-kun, I told you that Anko has been troubled lately. She’s very conflicted over all this, and I can’t blame her, but it’s very important that she gets over this phase and sorts herself out. One of the basics of teaching is to punish students when they behave badly and reward them when they behave well.” He gestured towards them both. “So Mizuki-kun is the punishment and you are the reward.”

Iruka and Mizuki exchanged a glance, and Mizuki looked as uncomfortable as Iruka felt.

“Anko wouldn’t help you do this,” Iruka said. “She wouldn’t. You’re lying.”

“On the contrary,” Orochimaru mused, “if either of us is your mythical bogeyman, Anko is. She’s the one who picks out the children, she’s the one who tells them about a place in the woods where the dead can speak, and she’s the one who takes them by the hand and leads them out of the village and into my waiting arms.”

Iruka felt sick. He was shaking his head, hadn’t noticed when he’d started but now he shook it even more vigorously.

“You’re lying,” he said again, but it came out as a whisper. “She wouldn’t lure kids out here for you.”

Orochimaru gave him a pitying look. “She lured you, didn’t she?”

She had. She’d told him a story and sent him running off on his own to save Mizuki. It was true, Iruka couldn’t deny it, and yet he was still shaking his head as though that could make a difference. As long as he refused to believe it, maybe the truth would rewrite itself just for him.

He turned to Mizuki. “Did Anko...take you?”

Mizuki shook his head. “He took me. Anko – she saw us together, chased after us. She was screaming in the woods and he –” He swallowed again, raising a hand to his throat, and Iruka saw a thin red line across the flesh, barely scabbed over. “He said he’d kill me if she didn’t shut up. He told her to go fetch you.”

“And now you find yourself in the same position as Anko,” Orochimaru said. “What will you do, Iruka-kun? I can have you transferred to my genin team tomorrow – I’m sure your jounin-sensei won’t put up much of a fight. After all the trouble you’ve caused, he’ll be glad to have you off his hands. I’ll let you carry on with your seals lessons, of course – I wouldn’t want to get in the way of your education. And if you’ll help me with a few small tasks, I’ll teach you all the secret knowledge that no one else dares speak aloud.”

Iruka cast a wild, desperate look at Mizuki, and then at the child-shaped heaps of blankets, so silent, so still. There had to be a way out of this. There *had* to be. But if there was he couldn’t see it. He was caught in the trap so tightly he could barely breathe.

“I don’t want to know,” he said. “I don’t want to learn this stuff!”

“Not even how to raise the dead?”

Iruka had to close his eyes. “That’s not possible. It was just a story. You’re trying to trick me again.”

“There are ways.” Orochimaru’s voice was so smooth, low and seductive, and Iruka didn’t trust him at all and yet even now – *even now* – he couldn’t help but want to know. “That will be my reward to you, Iruka-kun. Help me, and I’ll teach you how to see your parents again.”

A tear slipped down Iruka’s cheek and he let it fall unhindered. Orochimaru brushed it gently away and Iruka didn’t have the strength to even pull away when he cupped Iruka’s jaw and stroked a thumb over his cheekbone.

“Don’t cry,” he murmured. “I’ll take good care of you. Isn’t that what you wanted? Someone to look after you?”

“Don’t fucking touch him,” Mizuki growled. “I was looking after him. He doesn’t need you.” But there was no conviction in his words. He couldn’t tell Iruka not to obey. Not when he was the one in the cage. Iruka looked at him and saw the years of his future falling away. Orochimaru couldn’t keep him here forever. Soon, if Iruka didn’t do something, Mizuki would die here. But Iruka wasn’t strong enough or smart enough to save him yet.

He’d come down here thinking he could be the next White Fang of Konoha, a hero who would return triumphant with his friends. But he’d been arrogant enough to think he wouldn’t have to make a sacrifice like Sakumo had. That he could outsmart Death and walk away unscathed. He should have learnt the hard lessons from the stories of others: no one makes a bargain with a monster and doesn’t have to pay a price.

“If I do it,” he said, “if I do what you tell me to, will you let Mizuki go?”

Orochimaru cast a contemplative look at Mizuki. He didn’t look at him the same way he looked at Iruka. His gaze was flatter, and it didn’t linger as long.

“One day,” he said. “When I’ve finished my experiments, I’ll give him back to you.”

How long would that take? How many children would it take? Iruka didn’t dare ask. Instead he looked at Mizuki again, stuck in that tiny cage surrounded by dying children.

“Just tell him you’ll do it,” Mizuki said. “You don’t have a choice.”

No, he didn’t. He couldn’t let Mizuki die here. He understood suddenly how Anko had been dragged so deep into this that she’d even sent Iruka into the monster’s lair.

“All right,” he said, his voice hoarse. “I’ll do it.”

Orochimaru smiled at him, that starving, child-devouring smile. “Good boy,” he said.

He moved closer, into Iruka’s space, his hand stroking lightly down Iruka’s throat and under the neckline of his t-shirt, pushing the damp fabric aside to bare more of Iruka’s shoulder. Iruka had no idea what he was doing, he wished Orochimaru would stop *touching* him, but he didn’t know what to do to make it stop. Orochimaru bent his head, as though about to kiss him or bite him, and Iruka tensed, every instinct trying to pull him away from those long fingers and that hungry mouth.

There was a faint ripple of chakra from somewhere close by and then the ground rumbled under his feet. Orochimaru frowned and looked round towards the doorway.

“It seems my wayward student has come home,” he said, mercifully letting Iruka go. “I’ll go welcome her back. Wait here.”

He strode over to the doorway, letting down the wards and then bringing them back up behind him, sealing Iruka into the room. As soon as he was gone, Mizuki turned to Iruka and started talking urgently.

“Can you get rid of these seals?” he asked.

Iruka stared at him, still so suffused with defeat and despair that he didn’t understand what Mizuki was talking about.

“What seals?”

“The ones on the cage.” Mizuki flicked the space between the bars and there was a spark of electricity. He shook his hand, hissing through his teeth, and jerked his head at the paper seals plastered to the outside of the cage. “If you get rid of those we can blast this thing open somehow.”

Iruka looked at the seals. It felt like his thoughts were wading through thick mud. The symbols seemed to twist themselves out of familiar shapes and into a language he vaguely remembered but couldn’t decipher.

“And then what?” he asked. “We can’t fight him. He’s a *sannin*. The hokage taught him. If he wanted to kill us, he could.”

“Get rid of the damn seals, Iruka,” Mizuki said, stressing every word. “Pull yourself together! You try to trap ANBU for fun and you’re going to let this creep tell you what to do? You’re meant to be the smart one!”

“I’m not...”

“You’re the hokage’s favourite,” Mizuki insisted. “You’re being taught by the best goddamn seals master in the village. She’s never taught anyone before! You’re this – this stupid fucking prodigy who everyone loves and you don’t even see it.”

“That isn’t true!” Iruka was so stunned he could only stare, even as he knew the seconds were ticking by and Orochimaru would be back soon.

Mizuki smacked a hand against the bars. "Iruka," he hissed. "This is not the time for a therapy session, so get over the low fucking self-esteem and remember who the fuck you are. Are you a trouble-making, trap-building little shit or aren't you?"

Well, when he put it like *that*.

"Of course I am," Iruka said. He scrubbed the last of the tears from his eyes and took a deep breath, focusing again on the seals on Mizuki's cage. "OK, let me look at these."

"Look quickly."

Mizuki didn't interrupt while Iruka examined the seal nearest him. On closer inspection, it wasn't as complicated as he'd first thought. It was a barrier woven through the bars of the cage, designed to fill the spaces between the metal, and it reacted with small jolts of electricity when touched. Iruka pulled his fountain pen out of his pocket and considered what to do. He couldn't deactivate a seal that was powered with somebody else's chakra – only Orochimaru could take down the barrier. But live seals could still be edited if you knew how to do it safely, and Iruka did – more or less.

But it wouldn't be enough to free Mizuki from the cage. They'd still be two genin up against one of Konoha's most powerful jounin, and Anko was an unknown variable. Iruka didn't know whose side she'd take if it came to a fight. She was probably smart enough to stick with her sensei rather than risk his wrath, and Iruka couldn't blame her.

"Hey, can you use chakra right now?" Iruka asked. "Have you already tried anything?"

Mizuki shook his head and held up his hands. A metal cuff glittered on each wrist, and Iruka didn't have to ask to know what it was made of: the same compound as chakra wire, a metal with natural chakra-repelling properties. It disrupted the flow of chakra in the pathways and stopped shinobi from moulding it into jutsus.

So scratch this plan. Mizuki would be no more helpful in a fight than a civilian right now. Iruka abandoned that train of thought and instead turned his mind to building a trap. It was what he was good at – the only thing he'd ever been really good at. He didn't have much to work with – he'd used up all his spiderweb seals on Kakashi and most of his chakra wire on the decoy – but he had a few blank slips of chakra paper, a handful of weapons...

He looked around the room, at the ten cages lining the walls, each with their own electrocuted barrier seals. Use what you have to hand, Asuka-sensei would have said. Not just your tools but your environment.

And suddenly the pieces clicked into place and Iruka knew what he had to do.

"Watch the door, yell if he comes back," he said.

He moved past Mizuki's cage to the next one, uncapping the pen and making a few strokes on the seal, trying not to look at the motionless, blanket-draped form on the floor.

"What about my cage?" Mizuki asked, frowning at him.

"I can't do yours yet," Iruka said, moving onto the next one and trying not to rush. The seals on each cage were part of a small system. All he had to do was identify the main seal and make a simple edit that would hopefully carry over to the rest when the time came. Hopefully being the key word, but he didn't have time to second guess himself.

"What exactly are you doing?"

"What you told me to," Iruka said. He accidentally brushed a finger against the barrier and jerked back with a muttered curse as it shocked him. "Causing trouble, building traps and being a little shit."

He glanced back to see Mizuki smirking at him.

“About time.”

Muffled voices came from the next room. The wards must have some kind of silencing seal on them, Iruka considered idly, though they were probably designed to mute the noises from this side. After all, Orochimaru wouldn't want to listen to children sobbing while he did whatever mad scientists did in their laboratories. It would really spoil the mood.

“Hurry up,” Mizuki urged as Iruka crossed the room and started editing the seals on the other side.

“I'm going as fast as I can. If I rush too much I'll mess it up.”

“If you rush too little, we're both screwed.”

“No pressure,” Iruka muttered. His finger accidentally brushed the barrier again. “Ah, fuck!”

He finished the last seal and put the cap on the pen, shoving it into his pocket and heading back over to Mizuki's cage.

“We need to get you out of there before I can finish,” he said.

“That's what I *told* you to do,” Mizuki said, scowling.

“I can't destroy the seals, I need them.”

“So how the hell are you going to get me out?”

Before Iruka could answer, the wards dropped and Anko stepped into the room. Iruka felt his heart clench at the sight of her. Her eyes were puffy and her hair had fallen out of its ponytail, rain-soaked around her shoulders. Her clothes were wet through and she was shivering. She came a few steps into the room and then stopped, shoulders hunched and gaze low to avoid locking eyes with either of them.



Orochimaru had followed her in and he hung back against the opposite wall and simply watched, like someone about to enjoy a show.

Iruka didn't know what to say. Before he could find the right words, he needed to sort out his feelings, but they were knotted together so tightly he couldn't pick them apart. Was he angry with her? Upset? Had he forgiven her when he'd been put in her place and accepted Orochimaru's rule over his fate? He didn't have the answer to any of those questions.

By the look of her, Anko was similarly struggling. She raised a hand to her mouth and chewed on a hangnail, gaze darting everywhere but at his face, although he noticed she kept looking past him at Mizuki. She didn't speak but he sensed an apology in the way she held herself.

"Goddamnit, Anko," Mizuki snapped, and they both jumped. "Why didn't you just tell us when you had the chance?"

Anko's chin finally came up and she looked straight at him in her surprise.

"I couldn't," she said.

"Yes you could." Mizuki folded his arms in his best disappointed mother pose. "You could have just said over dinner 'hey guys, my sensei is a crazy fuck who's kidnapping children' and we would have helped you."

"You wouldn't have believed me," Anko insisted. She took another couple of wary steps closer.

"I'd have believed you," Iruka said, and Anko flinched at the sound of his voice. "I believed a lot of crazy things. Why not one more?"

She still wouldn't look at him. He wasn't sure he wanted her to, didn't know what power her gaze would have over him. It might give him

strength or break him.

“But I helped him,” she said. Her voice was very small. “I – I didn’t want to hurt them. I just.”

“You just what?” Iruka asked. He understood why she’d betrayed him. Orochimaru had taken Mizuki, she’d had no choice but to obey. But the others? What had he been holding over her then?

Anko tore viciously at her fingernail with her teeth. “The first one was after my parents died. After that night. I didn’t know before then, I swear, I didn’t know anything. But I was all alone and it was – it was the worst thing. No one would help me. I was *all alone*, Iruka, and nobody cared.”

She finally looked him straight in the eye and it was worse than anything he’d feared because he saw, reflected back at him, himself spending days alone in the cemetery and lying awake in the dead of night and in alleyways picking fights with ANBU just to hear someone say his name.

“He was the only one who saw me,” she whispered. “He was all I had.”

From behind her, Orochimaru spoke up softly. “I’m still all you have.”

A blaze of anger fired inside Iruka’s chest. Not at Anko – at the man who’d preyed on her in her weakest moment. Rage was such a familiar emotion that it comforted him, made him feel more normal, but for once he tamped it down and didn’t let it burn through him. It had never helped him before, not really, and it certainly wouldn’t now. He thought of Hound – of Kakashi – and grudgingly admitted that maybe he’d been right. It was time to grow up and get himself under control.

“The three of us have each other,” he said instead, and tried not to wince at how pathetically hopeful Anko looked. “We always had each other. We still do.”

“Some of us more than others,” Mizuki grumbled, kicking the bars of his cage.

Iruka couldn't have asked for better timing. If there was one thing you could rely on Mizuki for, it was his bitching. If Iruka hadn't been so tense he might have smiled.

“Can't you let Mizuki out?” he asked Orochimaru. “Just for five minutes. We need to settle this between the three of us.”

Orochimaru cocked his head to one side.

“Childhood friendships are so complicated,” he said. “You can still talk to him. I won't ever stop you from seeing him, but you have to understand that he lives here now.”

Mizuki pulled a face.

“I know,” Iruka said. He dared cross the room, although the last thing he wanted to do was get closer to Orochimaru. “And I already said I'd help you. But this is important. Please.” Orochimaru's lips twitched up at that word, or maybe at the proximity. Iruka forced himself into arm's reach and then tried again, letting his voice break this time. “Please?”

He'd expected the hand that rubbed him soothingly on the arm, and so he managed not to flinch away.

“Well, since you asked so nicely,” Orochimaru said, “how could I say no?”

He sauntered over to Mizuki's cage, and Iruka noticed that he touched Anko too as he passed her, just a light brush of his hand against her back. Had he always been so touchy-feely? How did she stand it?

He was about to follow Orochimaru back over but something had caught the attention of his subconscious and he found himself

glancing over at the doorway. In the space between this room and the lab was the heatwave shimmer of the wards. Crap, he'd forgotten about them. Even if his trap worked and they managed to capture Orochimaru, there were two sets of wards they'd now have to disable before they could leave. Anko could apparently open the entrance in the cliff face, so if they could persuade her to betray her sensei then she could let them through that barrier, but had Orochimaru trusted her enough to put her chakra into these wards too? If he hadn't, would Iruka have time to pick his way through them before Orochimaru found some way to stop them?

There were so many unknown variables, and relying on Anko was a risk, but then no part of this wasn't risky. Doing nothing would be the riskiest of all, and so Iruka tried to swallow his doubts and push on with his plan.

Heart beating hard in his chest, he followed Orochimaru back over to the cage as he deactivated the seal. He then took a key from his pocket and unlocked the cage, opening the door and making an ironically polite gesture for Mizuki to step out. Warily, Mizuki obeyed.

Anko flung herself into his arms and Mizuki froze, looking more alarmed at being hugged than at being imprisoned. He patted her back awkwardly.

"I'm sorry," she wailed.

Orochimaru was watching them with a small amused smile, and Iruka slipped a hand into his pocket and curled his fingers around the pen. He knew what he had to do but he had no idea how he was going to accomplish it.

Once he edited the seal on Mizuki's cage and activated it, the ten cages should, theoretically, become the ten points of a large barrier. Instead of the barrier clinging to the spaces between the bars of a single cage, it would form itself in the spaces between the cages, creating a large electrocuted barrier that would seal off most of the room while leaving the doorway free. To capture Orochimaru, Iruka

needed him to be standing between the cages instead of off to the side, and he needed to make sure no one else ended up trapped in there with him. But how was he supposed to convince Orochimaru to walk across the room and then keep him so distracted he didn't notice Iruka messing with the seal? Iruka chewed on his lip. It was just one more problem, but he had to make this work. It was the only chance they had.

He took a tentative step closer to Orochimaru, ideas racing through his head, things he could say or do to lure Orochimaru into the right spot. There was no time to mess this up. If Orochimaru suspected that Iruka was going to try something, there would be repercussions – and probably for Mizuki rather than him. The thought of being responsible for Mizuki getting hurt made Iruka feel sick. He took another step closer, wetting his lips, trying to choose the right thing to say. Orochimaru glanced at him, noticing his hesitant approach, and raised an eyebrow. It was now or never. Iruka opened his mouth to speak.

He wasn't quite sure what happened next. There was a sudden burst of movement and noise from behind him – to his right, he saw Anko dragging Mizuki away – and then Orochimaru had grabbed him by the arm, whirled him around and pulled him back against his chest, and there was a knife pressed in a hot, stinging line against his windpipe.

The wards that had so troubled Iruka just moments ago were gone and Kakashi stood inside the room, sword in hand but frozen in the act of raising it. He was wearing his ANBU mask and Iruka couldn't believe what he was seeing. How could Kakashi be here? He almost said Kakashi's name but the knife was already biting into him and he didn't dare speak in case the movement sent the blade deeper.

"You've been careless, Anko," Orochimaru said. He still sounded calm, although the edge of amusement had left his voice. "A stray dog followed you home."

Anko and Mizuki were somewhere to Iruka's left – he could just make out the shape of them in his peripherals – but he couldn't turn his head to check on them. Kakashi spoke to them without taking his eyes off Orochimaru.

"You two, get out of here."

"I don't think so," Orochimaru said. "I don't want to hurt my newest playmate, but if anyone tries to leave this room then I'll have to carve him up just a little."

Iruka didn't doubt that he would. Neither did Kakashi, because he didn't ask again.

"You must be the ANBU Iruka-kun caught in his trap," Orochimaru mused. "A little embarrassing to be beaten by a child. Are you having an off day? You must realise that if you've already lost to him, you have very little chance of beating me."

Kakashi didn't move, and Iruka only hoped he had some kind of plan because his own had veered so far off course he couldn't imagine how he could get it back on track.

"If you're so confident, stop hiding behind a child," Kakashi said. "Come and take me on yourself."

Iruka felt Orochimaru's muscles tense ever so slightly, as though he were intending to do just that, and Iruka suddenly felt a terrible fear – not for himself but for Kakashi. Kakashi was good, yes, but he was still just a teenager. For the first time he realised how *young* Kakashi was, and how much older and more experienced Orochimaru was. Kakashi was good but was he *that* good?

His own knife was still in its holster at his waist and he slowly moved a hand towards it. Maybe he didn't need a trap after all. If he was fast enough...maybe...

He grabbed for the knife just as Kakashi said, "Iruka, don't!" and there was another moment where everything moved too fast for him to comprehend. He thought he saw a flash of red from Kakashi's mask, and then there was something huge and terrible bearing down on him from above, some monster, and Orochimaru's knife left his neck as he slashed towards the creature. Someone else grabbed him, and it was Mizuki, yanking him away in Orochimaru's moment of distraction, and then the monster was gone and Kakashi was between them, his sword clanging off Orochimaru's kunai.

"Genjutsu, hm?" Orochimaru said. He moved back and Kakashi lunged after him, raining blows with his sword that Orochimaru either blocked or dodged. "Pity your monsters aren't real." His knife bounced off an armoured forearm but he grinned. "Mine are."

He waited for Kakashi to come at him again and then ducked under the sword and delivered a kick to Kakashi's side that sent him stumbling into one of the cages. The electric barrier sizzled and Kakashi let out a strangled yelp and jerked away. But Orochimaru had already nicked his own palm with his blade and he pressed his hand to the ground. The room shook, and Iruka tasted iron as the air was suffused with chakra, and then a large snake materialised as if bursting out of the ground. It was hard to tell how long it was when its tail was coiled over itself, but when it reared itself up like a viper its neck alone was as tall as Kakashi.

"Iruka," Kakashi barked over his shoulder. "Run! All of you!"

The snake lunged at him, so fast it made Iruka jump, its hiss like steam escaping from a boiler about to blow. Mizuki grabbed him by the arm again and bundled him towards the door, Anko right behind them, and Iruka let himself be tugged but couldn't help staring back towards Kakashi, frightened for him. The snake was trying to curl its tail around him, and when he turned to fight it off with his sword, its head came from his blind spot, snapping its vicious teeth, only failing to bite through his chest because of the ANBU armour. Orochimaru was murmuring instructions at the snake, voice low enough that he

seemed to be hissing too in some arcane language full of slippery consonants.

“Iruka, for fuck’s sake,” Mizuki snapped at him, giving him such a hard yank that Iruka almost fell over. “We have to get out of here!”

“He isn’t strong enough,” Iruka said, not taking his eyes off Kakashi. The snake was getting the better of him, and Orochimaru’s hands were moving again, performing a jutsu that made the ground quake beneath their feet and small stones fall from the cave roof. Kakashi was sent off balance perilously close to another of the cages, but this time he managed to avoid being shocked.

Anko grabbed Iruka’s other arm.

“Come on, come on,” she moaned. “He said we had to run back to the village and get help. Come *on*, Iruka.”

“He said –?” Iruka stared at her, still resisting as they both pulled him towards the door with unsteady steps on the shaking ground.

“Kakashi didn’t sneak in here! You let him in!”

Anko nodded. She was very pale and her fingernails were digging into Iruka’s arm deep enough that he thought she might draw blood.

“We have to go,” she urged. “Before sensei stops us.”

But Iruka couldn’t. He couldn’t leave Kakashi here to die in this cave. Because he would. He would die. Even as Iruka watched Kakashi cast his own jutsu, something that surrounded his hand with spitting sparks of electricity and plunged it into the snake, Iruka knew with cold certainty that if they left, Kakashi would die here.

He couldn’t let that happen.

“You two go,” he said, trying to pull away from Mizuki and Anko, who both tightened their grips. “I need to help him.”



“What the hell can you do?” Mizuki asked, his voice rising. “He’s ANBU, you’re genin – you’ll just get in his way.”

The snake was injured but not dead. It writhed violently, blood splattering the walls from a gaping wound halfway down its body. The air was thick with the smell of charred flesh, and Iruka fought not to gag. It wasn’t a battle he wanted to jump into. He wasn’t stupid, he knew Mizuki was right. And yet.

“I set up my trap,” he said grimly. “I can still pull this off.”

Kakashi swung his sword at the snake’s thrashing tail and the blade sank deep into the flesh. The snake’s hiss was loud and furious, and it sent all the nerve endings clanging in Iruka’s body, reminded him that he was prey in the lair of a predator. His legs itched to run but he held himself firm, twisting in Mizuki and Anko’s grip.

“You’re insane,” Mizuki said. “That trap was our last desperate hope when we didn’t have a fucking ANBU trying to save us. We don’t need the trap, we need to *run*.”

“Then run!” Iruka yelled. “But I’m not going with you!”

“God help me, I will *carry* you out of here if you don’t stop being a fucking stupid –”

“What do you need?” Anko asked.

Iruka stared at her. He hadn’t expected help to come from this quarter. Anko’s eyes were dilated with terror but her voice was steady. Her grip on his arm hadn’t loosened but she was no longer tugging at him.

“Anko,” Mizuki spluttered. “Not you too.”

“Tell me what to do,” Anko insisted. “I want this to stop, Iruka. Tell me how to make it all stop.”

Iruka turned back to the battle raging in the middle of the room. He was glad suddenly that the children had been drugged – even the fighting hadn't roused them, and he wasn't sure if he could have carried on with his plan if they'd been awake and screaming. He couldn't save them, couldn't carry them out of here, and he dragged his gaze away from the silent shapes, relieved that they were at least protected by the barriers for now.

"I need to get Kakashi out of the way," he said. "Imagine there's a line between the last two cages, cutting off this part of the room from the rest. We all need to be on this side and Orochimaru on the other. Then I can trap him over there."

Anko looked at the cages, looked at her jounin-sensei, and nodded.

"I can do that," she said.

"Wait," Mizuki started, but she'd already let go of Iruka and stepped away.

Then she did something Iruka had never seen her do before. He felt a sudden pulse of chakra, Anko's chakra except not quite, like it was tainted somehow, and then it spiked, swelling, as though she'd been repressing her chakra levels all along and was now letting it all spill out. She let out a cry of pain and hunched her shoulders, and Mizuki swore and pulled Iruka away from her.

"What the fuck, what the fuck," he was saying over and over. "*Her skin.*"

Iruka saw it just as Mizuki pointed it out. Something was spreading over Anko's neck, her face, down her right arm. Black marks, flame-like, were covering her body like her skin was charring in patches from the inside out. Kakashi and Orochimaru both glanced towards her, and then she shot straight into the fray – at Kakashi, who had to duck the fireballs she threw his way. Orochimaru laughed, his snake half-dead at his feet.

“Did you know she could do that?” Mizuki asked, staring at her with wide eyes.

“I don’t even know *what* she just did!”

But Iruka didn’t have time to wonder how many more things he didn’t know about Anko. He slipped out of Mizuki’s distracted hold and hurried back over to the open cage. The barrier was still down, but that made no difference. In fact, it was easier this way. He found the main seal and carefully inked new lines onto it, keeping half an eye on the fight. Mizuki had followed him and was standing tensely behind him, keeping up a litany of swearing under his breath.

Anko had joined the fight seemingly on Orochimaru’s side and she was trying to drive Kakashi back into the safe zone by attacking him. Orochimaru was standing back and letting her, watching her fight in the same hungry way he’d looked at Iruka. He’d done something to her, Iruka thought, feeling sick. That diseased chakra, those marks on her skin – he’d used her in one of his experiments and now he was observing the results.

Kakashi wasn’t fighting back. Instead he was talking to her, a low, urgent plea for her to stop, while he dodged and deflected her blows. A particularly vicious wind jutsu pushed him back a few steps and Iruka held his breath, hand hovering over the seal, ready to activate it as soon as Kakashi and Anko were back over the line.

But Kakashi never got to safety because that’s when Orochimaru stepped back in. Iruka had been so focused on Anko that he’d taken his eyes off Orochimaru – and apparently so had Kakashi, because when Orochimaru suddenly appeared behind him, he didn’t turn around in time and Orochimaru landed a blow to the back of his neck that for a heart-stopping moment Iruka thought had been the blade of a knife.

Kakashi fell forward heavily onto his knees, but although there was a kunai in Orochimaru’s hand, he’d brought it down hilt-first. The blade glinted as he twirled it around, and as Kakashi tried to scramble

away, Orochimaru brought a boot down onto his back, forcing him onto his chest on the rock. Kakashi reached for a weapon and Orochimaru threw the knife, which pierced the back of his hand and stuck there, wedged between his finger bones. Kakashi let out a gasping cry of pain.

Reflexively, Iruka darted towards him, but Mizuki grabbed the back of his shirt.

“Don’t get distracted,” he hissed. “Leave it to Anko.”

“But...”

Anko had frozen. She was staring down at Kakashi’s hand as though she’d thrown the knife herself and was appalled at what she’d done.

Orochimaru kicked Kakashi’s sword aside, and it skittered almost the whole way to Iruka’s feet. Iruka glanced down at it, and when he looked back up Orochimaru was watching him and smiling.

“Go ahead and try,” he said. His voice was soft and even as though the fight hadn’t exerted him at all. Iruka didn’t move. Orochimaru turned back to Kakashi, grabbing the knife and yanking it out of his hand, eliciting another pained sound that made Iruka wince.

“You think you can get away with killing an ANBU?” Kakashi asked, and Iruka’s heart gave a jump at the word ‘kill’. He’d known it was likely that Kakashi couldn’t win against a sannin, but he hadn’t fully believed that Kakashi might die in front of him until now.

“Wait,” Mizuki breathed in his ear.

Orochimaru’s foot was still pressing down on the centre of Kakashi’s back, keeping him pinned to the floor, and he bent over, resting the point of the knife at the nape of Kakashi’s neck. Kakashi kept very still.

“They’ll wonder where you went,” Orochimaru agreed, “but no one knows where you are. No one will find this place and no one will link your disappearance to me.”

“You don’t know that,” Kakashi said. His voice was tight, and Iruka wondered if he was afraid. He wanted to do something and knew there was nothing he could do.

“I’m friends with a lot of powerful people,” Orochimaru said. He was smiling, like he was enjoying this. “The right words in the right ears and you’ll be labelled a missing nin. It won’t be hard. Although.” He cocked his head to the side, considering. “Would killing you be a waste? The children have worked well enough as experimental subjects but there might be something I could do with someone stronger. Especially someone with a bloodline limit – even if it is stolen. You gave yourself away with that genjutsu, Kakashi-kun. I’ve been interested in acquiring a sharingan eye for some time now – the question is whether I’d rather have it attached to you or not.”

Iruka couldn’t stand silently and watch any longer.

“Leave him alone!” he said, and Mizuki’s hand curled around his wrist, squeezing a painful warning that Iruka ignored.

Orochimaru looked up at him.

“Now, now, Iruka-kun, I thought we’d already agreed that you were going to be my obedient student.” His gaze flicked to Mizuki. “Or have you forgotten the consequences?”

Iruka hesitated, and he might have stopped there if Anko hadn’t taken one quiet step towards Orochimaru. He was facing away from her, hadn’t seen the way her gaze was fixed on Kakashi, but Iruka knew Anko’s stubborn look when he saw it. She might be terrified and she might be exhausted from the fight, but she was still set on the task Iruka had given her.

So Iruka kept talking.

“Don’t hurt him,” he said. “Please! Just – Just lock him up like you did with Mizuki. Anko and I won’t tell anyone.”

“No, you won’t,” Orochimaru said. He was brushing the point of the knife lightly up and down the top of Kakashi’s spine, and Kakashi was lying completely still beneath him. His breaths were coming in shallow, audible gasps as he struggled to breathe under the crushing pressure of Orochimaru’s weight on his back. “But you’ve already asked me for one favour today. You asked me to let Mizuki-kun out of his cage and I did.”

Behind him, Anko took two more steps. Slow and silent.

“But you can’t kill him,” Iruka insisted. “Kakashi’s right – someone will find out. He’s not like the rest of us. People will care where when he goes missing.”

“Your concern is touching,” Orochimaru said, “but no matter how prettily you beg, I’ve made up my mind. I’d rather have that eye without the risk of the person it’s attached to.” Kakashi jerked a little beneath him but there was nothing he could do. “And it’s best to harvest it while it’s still fresh. Why don’t you come closer, Iruka-kun, and I’ll teach you a little about biology?”

He reached for Kakashi’s mask at the same moment Anko lunged for the knife.

Orochimaru’s eyes widened but he wasn’t surprised enough for it to override his instincts, and he slashed at Anko with the knife before the shock had faded from his expression. Beneath him, Kakashi jerked round, grabbing Orochimaru’s ankle and tugging hard enough to throw him off balance. Even as he fell, Orochimaru managed to kick Kakashi square in the face, and Anko dove for his knife hand again. There was a tangle of limbs and blade as all three of them scrambled for the upper hand, and Iruka couldn’t see quite what was happening but he mouthed encouragements under his breath, clutching a sweaty hand into a fist.

Mizuki was less quiet. “Anko,” he yelled. “Grab him and *move*.” He was beckoning her frantically over to them, but Anko didn’t look up once, too intent on her struggle.

There was a sudden blast from the centre of the group, an explosion without the fire, and all three of them were flung apart. In the confusion, Iruka hadn’t even seen who had cast the jutsu, but Kakashi got the brunt of it, flying all the way to the opposite end of the room like a rag doll and crumpling against the wall. Anko, meanwhile, had fallen against one of the cages and she screamed as it shocked her, scrambling away on her hands and knees.

Orochimaru was the first to recover. He picked himself up, glanced at Kakashi, who was lying very still in a heap, and then turned his attention to Anko. She was still on the floor, and when she saw him approaching, she froze and stared up at him in terror.

“I am so very disappointed in you, Anko,” Orochimaru said softly. He crouched down before her and she cringed back, but the cage was behind her and there was nowhere to go. “After everything I’ve given you,” – he gently touched the black marks on her face – “you’d use my gift against me?”

Anko was trembling. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“What has ANBU ever done for you?” Orochimaru asked. “What has Konoha ever done for you? Did you think Kakashi-kun was here to save you? Let me tell you what ANBU would do to you if they knew what you’d been doing here. They’d take you and lock you in a cell. They would stick pins under your fingernails and carve chunks of flesh from your bones until you told them every wicked thing you’ve ever done. And you’ve done so many wicked things, Anko. It would take them a long, long time to hear them all.”

Iruka looked over at Kakashi, who still hadn’t moved. He thought he could see blood matted in Kakashi’s pale hair. This had all gone to shit. He had to do something. Kakashi’s sword was still at his feet, almost within reach. He took a step towards it.

“Be very careful what choices you make, Iruka-kun,” Orochimaru said. He hadn’t even looked round. “You’ve been a good boy so far. I’d advise you watch and learn by example what happens when my students misbehave.”

“Don’t, Iruka,” Mizuki said, voice tight and low. “Don’t make it worse.”

Iruka didn’t see how things could get any worse. He looked down at the sword again but didn’t pick it up.

Orochimaru had turned his attention back to Anko, who was openly crying.

“My poor sweet girl,” he sighed. “I understand. You just want to be saved. How quickly you forget how bad things were before. I came for you when you were curled up on your parents’ graves with no one to care for you but the dead. You slept there for three whole nights and nobody wondered where you were. Nobody came looking, nobody cared. Except me. I picked you up and carried you home and I gave you everything you needed. Warmth, strength, love.” He paused and wiped the tears from her cheek with a tender thumb. “ANBU can’t save you, Anko, because you’ve already been saved. A life with me is the best you can hope for now.”

When he slid the knife into her stomach, it was almost gentle. Anko didn’t make a sound.

“No!” It wasn’t Iruka who cried out, but there was so much of his own shock and horror in the voice that he almost thought it was. No, it was Mizuki, who was jittering beside him as though he was holding himself back from running to Anko’s side. “Get up, you ANBU son of a bitch, get up and help her!”

Kakashi was already scrambling to his feet, blood still dripping from his head. Orochimaru moved swiftly away as he rushed towards Anko. She was still silent but her mouth was open, a hand pressed against the wound. Blood oozed between her fingers but didn’t show up against the rain-damp black of her t-shirt. Kakashi knelt down



beside her and tried to move her hand away so he could look, but she wouldn't let him, only pressed her palm harder against her stomach and stared past him at her teacher.

"Sensei," she said brokenly. "Help me."

Kakashi stood up slowly and stood in front of Anko, shielding her.

"She's your student," he said, and his voice trembled. "How could you do that?"

"She'll be fine," Orochimaru soothed. "The sooner you die, the sooner I can heal her. Does it hurt, Anko?"

"Yes," Anko whispered. "It hurts a lot."

"Good. Remember this pain. It's the most important lesson I'll ever teach you." He twirled the knife in his fingers, droplets of blood spattering from the blade. "And now, Kakashi-kun, it's your turn."

Kakashi tried to dart at him, but fell to the ground, his armour clattering on the stone. Anko had grabbed his leg and was still gripping it tight.

"Let go!" Kakashi said, and this time the panic in his voice was obvious.

"Good girl," Orochimaru breathed. "You always were a fast learner."

Iruka couldn't watch this. He snatched up the sword, but Mizuki grabbed him around the waist and held him back.

"Let go of me!"

"You fucking idiot," Mizuki yelled, trying to tug Iruka back as he squirmed and fought. "He'll kill us all! It's over, Iruka!"

Kakashi was pushing himself up onto his knees, one leg still clamped tight in Anko's grasp, trying to bring his hands together for a

jutsu but his left hand was still bleeding and his fingers weren't obeying him, a nerve nicked by the knife. Iruka elbowed Mizuki in the stomach and Mizuki pushed him roughly into the side of the cage. Although the barrier was down it still hurt to have metal jammed into his ribs, and the sword went clattering across the floor. As he grappled with Mizuki, he saw Anko kneel on Kakashi's leg, clamp it between her knees and bring her own hands together to use her awful tainted chakra for one last jutsu.

There was a rush beside him, and then suddenly Anko and Kakashi were on the ground next to the cage and the sword clattered on the stone where they'd been a moment ago. It took Iruka's brain a moment to catch up and realise Anko had performed a substitution jutsu.

The two of them were right on the border of Iruka's trap.

"Fuck!" Mizuki had realised too, and he released Iruka suddenly and grabbed Anko instead, dragging her back over the invisible line. She let him, clutching her stomach again and whimpering.

Kakashi had got to his feet and made to go back towards Orochimaru, who was striding towards them, and Iruka knew they'd never get another chance.

"Kakashi, that way," he yelled, pointing towards Anko and Mizuki.  
"Go, go!"

"I have to," Kakashi started, but Iruka didn't let him speak.

"Trust me!"

He pressed one hand against the seal on Mizuki's cage, and Kakashi noticed, hesitated, then took two steps back. Over the line.

Orochimaru lunged towards him, but Iruka was faster. He pushed chakra into the seal and felt a sudden rush of power as the barriers *changed*. It was like he'd connected the final component of a circuit,

and now electricity could rush unimpeded along the wires. All ten cages stopped being individual barriers and instead became parts of a single system, a much larger barrier connecting them all and curving overhead, encircling everything standing in the space between them.

Including Orochimaru.

He had almost made it out. He skidded to a halt mere feet from Kakashi, a solid yet almost invisible wall now humming in the air between them. Static electricity filled the room and made the hairs on Iruka's arms stand on end. He didn't know if the electric charge of the barriers would be ten times more powerful now that the seals had been combined, but Orochimaru didn't risk finding out. He didn't try to break out of the barrier, only stared through it at Kakashi and Anko, and then he turned his head to look at Iruka.

"Clever boy," he breathed.

Kakashi was staring at him too.

"Iruka, you..." He sounded awed, and later Iruka would revel in the way Kakashi said his name, but right now his pulse was still fluttering rabbit-fast and he was keyed up on adrenaline. Kakashi pulled himself together too, and his next words were more business-like, more Hound than Kakashi. "Will that hold him? How long for?"

"Um." Iruka wet his lips with his tongue. "I don't know. It's a compound seal system, so..."

"It's a what?"

"What he means," Orochimaru said, eyes still on Iruka, and he had never looked so ravenous, "is that the barrier is powered with two sets of chakra – his and mine."

Kakashi tensed. "If you could take it down, you'd have done it already."

Orochimaru hummed in agreement. "It will take a little while," he said. "But it can be done." He walked along the perimeter of the barrier until he and Iruka were face to face, and even though the barrier separated them, Iruka took a step back. Orochimaru smiled. "I've always had a knack for recognising talent. You have no idea how long I've been watching you, wondering how to make you my own."

"Hey, ANBU," Mizuki snapped. "We need to get out of here." He was crouched beside Anko, who was leaning heavily against his shoulder. Her skin was pale and sickly, and the black markings were fading away as her chakra drained.

"How long, Iruka?" Kakashi asked again.

"I don't know! I've only been studying seals for a few months!" Iruka knew he should move but he couldn't look away from Orochimaru. There was a hypnotic quality to his gaze, like a snake's. "And I may have skipped a lesson or two..."

Kakashi swore. "Then Anko will have to hang in there a little longer. Come on."

Iruka didn't move. Behind him, Anko whimpered as Mizuki helped her onto Kakashi's back. She gripped his shoulder with one hand and kept the other pressed tightly to her stomach.

"Run fast, Iruka-kun," Orochimaru murmured. "And maybe tonight you'll be fast enough. But know that one day I *will* catch you."

Iruka finally dragged his gaze away and turned, following Kakashi and Mizuki as they hurried through the doorway into the lab, but he couldn't help but look back one last time as he left the room.

Orochimaru stood among the sleeping forms of the caged and corpse-like children, and through the crackling veil of the barrier he seemed taller and gaunter, his edges blurred as though he could slip his body off like a cloak. He watched Iruka through dark eyes like

gaping mouths, swallowing him whole, and although no words passed between them, Iruka felt the promise of that insatiable appetite. It was not the hunger of a mortal man, but of something older and darker, and it would remember Iruka's face for a long, long time.

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The apartment felt bigger without Anko. Iruka stood in the living room staring at her futon, still shoved messily into the corner where she'd last folded it away. It had been a week since he'd returned from what the orphans were still calling the underworld, and he didn't know what to do with the last of Anko's things. He and Mizuki had already boxed up her clothes and the few personal items she'd owned, and a man from T&I had come and taken them away, but the futon remained.

"Come on, Iruka," Mizuki called from the hallway. "It's time to go."

"Right. Coming."

Iruka pulled his hair up into a messy ponytail as he toed on his shoes and followed Mizuki out of the flat. Everything had changed and yet it all felt the same. Orochimaru's lab felt like a fever dream, something that had happened in another time and place. Parts of it were disjointed in his memory, or else missing altogether. He knew they'd run back through the woods in the dead of night, and he knew also that Kakashi, Mizuki and Anko had been there with him as they'd fled, yet in his memory there were parts where he was sure he'd been alone, lost and stumbling through the trees.

Maybe the exhaustion and terror had confused his race towards the underworld with his flight away from it, or maybe he really had been separated from the group before finding them again. He'd thought that now he had a name for the bogeyman he'd feel certain of what

was story and what was truth, but he wondered if they weren't as distinct as that. Maybe some truths had enough story wrapped around them to elevate fantasy to facts. Maybe some stories had enough truth in them to give shape to the monsters under the bed and bring them out into the light.

"Takeo got released from the hospital yesterday," Mizuki said as they headed down the street. "Junko said he's doing OK. They couldn't save his eye, but he's doing a hell of a lot better than some of the other kids."

Iruka nodded. Of the fourteen children who'd vanished over the past year, nine had been brought back to the village. ANBU were still searching for the bodies of the other five, but the mountain was a large graveyard to scour. Personally, Iruka didn't think they'd ever find them.

"Have you heard anything about Orochimaru-sensei?"

Mizuki shook his head. "Lots of rumours, nothing concrete."

Iruka hadn't expected anything different, but he still felt a pang of unease. It would probably never go away, that feeling of being pursued that had followed him down from the mountain and lingered ever since.

Once they'd made it back to the village, Kakashi had run on ahead to get Anko to the hospital, and it had been left to Iruka and Mizuki to find some more ANBU and explain to them what had happened. Their account had been garbled and breathless but for once they'd been believed. Mizuki had simply shown them the cuffs on his wrists and Anko's blood smeared on his shirt and hands, and they'd called for reinforcements and set off into the night.

Of course, they'd been too slow. By the time they reached the cliff face, they'd found the entrance to the underworld still open but Iruka's barrier disabled and Orochimaru gone.

Iruka shook himself out of the memories as they reached the hospital and started to pay more attention to his surroundings. The hospital was a cluster of several buildings set out in the most un-intuitive arrangement possible, and Iruka hadn't been here enough to know his way around. Mizuki strode through the maze without slowing down, as though he knew exactly where he was going, but he always moved with a certain amount of confidence and Iruka knew better than to trust that he actually knew the way.

"There she is!" Mizuki grabbed his arm and pointed. "Those bastards, they let her out early. I bet they *wanted* us to miss her."

It was easy to spot who he was pointing to. A dark-haired girl was coming out of one of the buildings, flanked by an ANBU on one side and a long-haired blond man on the other.

"Anko!" Mizuki yelled, and her head jerked around as they ran towards her.

Iruka half expected the ANBU to stop them, but she didn't say anything as they skidded to a panting halt in front of her. Up close, he realised he recognised the blond man as the Yamanaka clan heir, Inoichi. Iruka had never spoken to him before, but Inoichi looked between him and Mizuki as though he recognised them too.

"Shall I leave you to have a quick chat with your friends?" he asked Anko, who nodded slowly. "Just a few minutes, boys. Don't wear her out."

He and the ANBU wandered away, far enough to give them privacy but close enough to keep an eye on them. Now they were gone, a silence fell among the three of them. It was the first time Iruka had seen Anko since she'd been spirited off to the hospital, and she looked tired and fragile, her gaze flitting nervously between them.

"We tried to come visit you," he said. "But they wouldn't let us in."

Anko looked surprised. "You came?"

“Of course we did,” Mizuki said, frowning at her. “They didn’t tell you?”

Anko shook her head. “I thought,” she said, and then stopped. Looked at the ground. “I thought you wouldn’t want to see me again.”

There was another awkward pause. Iruka and Mizuki had spoken daily about what had happened on the mountain, and about what had happened in the long year before then. They’d picked apart everything Anko had ever said and done, searched for the clues they should have found so much sooner, and after all that speculation Iruka had so many questions and yet no words to ask them with. How did you begin to ask someone about the children they’d taken to their deaths? About the promises whispered in their ear by the devil?

“We’re your friends,” he simply said, and it came out sounding like a question, but he wasn’t sure if he was asking her or himself.

It couldn’t be the same as it was before. They all knew that. But late one night this past week, Mizuki had asked if he had meant it when he’d told Orochimaru that he’d help him. And Iruka had thought a lot about that since then. Would he have taken children up the mountain if Kakashi hadn’t come to save them? If he’d had to measure Mizuki’s life against another child’s, who would he have chosen? And Iruka didn’t know for sure but he suspected.

“Where are they taking you?” Mizuki asked, and the tension dropped a notch as they all wordlessly agreed to leave the subject for another day.

Anko glanced over at Inoichi. “I’m going to stay in the Yamanaka house for a while,” she said.

“You’re getting adopted by a clan?” Mizuki asked incredulously. “I thought they’d be punishing you! I’ve been worried sick ever since they took all your things and said you wouldn’t be coming home.”



“They’re not *adopting* me,” Anko said. She looked down at the ground and scuffed the path with her shoe. “They questioned me a lot in the hospital. After my surgery I was tied to the bed and there were ANBU at my door. I think they thought I might try to run after sensei or...that he might come back for me.” Her tone was a mixture of frightened and wistful, and Iruka didn’t understand how she could want to see the man who’d stabbed her ever again. He didn’t think he’d ever understand the power Orochimaru had held over her, and maybe that was for the best.

“Doesn’t Inoichi work for T&I?” Mizuki asked, glancing over at Inoichi and frowning.

Anko nodded. “He...looked inside my head. At my memories. Some of them. There are a lot of really bad things in there. I think he wants me close so he can look at more of them. And he said that he can help me. That sensei had...groomed me, and he could help me undo the damage.”

“What does that mean?” Iruka asked.

Anko shrugged.

“Can we come and see you in your fancy new mansion?” Mizuki asked. “Or are you under house arrest?”

“I don’t know. I can’t go out much for a while anyway – the doctors said the knife hadn’t gone too deep but I’ll take a while to heal.” She fidgeted with a lock of hair, pulling it into her mouth and chewing on the end. “He wasn’t trying to kill me. He would have saved me. He just – he was mad that I wanted to leave him, that’s all.”

Iruka glanced at Mizuki, once again at a loss for how to respond. Mizuki looked as uncomfortable as he felt. Neither of them replied but Mizuki patted her awkwardly on the shoulder.

“We’ll come visit you,” he said firmly. “And if they’re awful and you need us to come kidnap you out of there, just say the word.”

“Yeah,” Iruka agreed. “I’m getting good at breaking into places I’m not meant to be. If you don’t want to be there, we’ll bust you out and take you home.”

Anko almost smiled at that. Her lips twitched, and she finally lifted her eyes from the ground and met Mizuki’s gaze, then Iruka’s.

“Thanks,” she said.

They didn’t get chance to say anything else. Inoichi was walking back over, and although he was smiling Iruka couldn’t help but think of him as Anko’s jailer as well as her carer.

“Time to get going, I think,” he said. “Say goodbye, Anko. You can see your friends again soon enough.”

Once they’d gone, Mizuki stuck his hands in his pockets, still watching after them, although they’d vanished out of sight.

“She’ll be OK,” he said.

“How do you know?”

“She survived being with him,” Mizuki said. “If she got through that, she can survive without him.”

The afternoon was wearing on, and around them people came and went without sparing a glance their way. News of Orochimaru’s crimes had gone around the village like wildfire, of course, but only the children seemed to know that it hadn’t been ANBU who’d discovered the lab. They were already telling stories – about Iruka, about Anko – and some of them were true and some weren’t, but Iruka had stopped trying to shape the whispers. The stories that survived wouldn’t be the truth he’d lived. They’d be more than that, and less. The essence and the heart of it would remain, and really that was all that mattered.

“Let’s go home,” Mizuki said, but Iruka shook his head.

“I’ll meet you there later,” he said. “There’s somewhere else I have to go first.”

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As many times as Iruka had passed the Hatake compound, he had never stepped through its gates before. He stood outside, gathering his courage and wondering why he felt so jittery, and then he rang the bell. During the wait between the chime of the bell and the gate opening, his courage almost failed and he considered turning around and running away, but before he had the chance the door opened. Kakashi stood on the other side, wearing casual clothes and carrying the same small child that Iruka had seen once before in a café and hated. He remembered the encounter with a writhing sense of guilt in his gut.

“Hey, Iruka,” Kakashi said. He stepped back from the door and nodded for Iruka to come inside. “Sorry, I meant to take Naruto back earlier but he fell asleep and I didn’t have the heart to wake him.”

“That’s fine,” Iruka said. He stepped past Kakashi, aware of every inch between them, feeling suddenly shy and out of place.

To avoid staring at Kakashi, he stared around at the compound grounds instead. The path from the front gate led across a neatly trimmed lawn to the main house, a traditional one-storey building with a veranda leading around the outside. There were two smaller buildings behind it that Iruka could see, and he glimpsed between them a large, grassy space lined with trees stretching towards the back of the property. He couldn’t imagine living somewhere so large – or so empty. Kakashi was the only person who lived here, and the grounds were quiet except for the soft tinkling of a wind chime somewhere out of view.

Before he could spend too long contemplating the solitude, a yank on his hair made him yelp and spin around. Naruto giggled, his fist still caught in Iruka's ponytail, and Kakashi gently took his wrist and scolded him.

"Naruto! We don't pull people's hair. Let go."

"Pretty," Naruto declared, and he yanked once more with delight before Kakashi managed to pry his small fingers from Iruka's hair. Iruka ducked away hastily as soon as he was free.

"Sorry," Kakashi said, and he leaned his head away as Naruto went for his hair next. "He's kind of a handful. Let's go inside and distract him with a toy or something."

The inside of Kakashi's home was just as quiet as the outside. The rooms were very sparse and clean, and Iruka wondered how Kakashi kept it looking so unlivable in. He spent the bare minimum of his own time in his apartment but it still looked as though a bomb had hit it despite Mizuki's efforts to bring some kind of order to their shared chaos.

Kakashi led the way into a large room at the back of the house, which was much less pristine. A rug had been placed on the tatami, the blue fabric stained in places, and it was strewn with children's toys and picture books. Kakashi deposited Naruto onto it and sat beside him on the floor, placing a teddy bear into his hands. Iruka hesitated, not sure whether to join them or to go sit on the couch, but Kakashi cleared some of the toys away from the spot next to him and waved him down, and Iruka found his cheeks heating as he sat stiffly on the rug.

Although technically he'd known Kakashi for the best part of a year, it felt different without the ANBU mask between them. Iruka had lain awake agonising over some of the things he'd said to Hound, so mortified that it was a wonder he had the nerve to speak to Kakashi at all.

“Built any ANBU traps lately?” Kakashi asked, and Iruka felt the flush spread from his cheeks down his neck.

“No!”

“Oh? Why not?” There was a teasing tone in Kakashi’s voice that made Iruka even more flustered. “Was catching me enough for you?”

“You’re the one who kept telling me to stop,” Iruka mumbled, staring hard at a toy dog on the rug.

“Since when did you ever listen to me? I thought pissing me off was your favourite game.” Naruto handed Kakashi the teddy bear, which he took with an automatic gesture, as though he was used to taking care of a small child. He watched as Naruto crawled across the rug and picked up a different doll, and when he spoke again, his tone was more serious. “I’ll never discourage you from building traps, but setting them in the streets was a bad idea. You could have hurt yourself or someone else. We have training grounds for a reason – maybe practice there from now on, huh?”

Iruka crossed his legs, bringing his knees up to his chest and wrapping his arms around them. “I don’t know if I want to make traps anymore.”

Kakashi frowned at him. “Why not? You’re so good at them.”

The praise was both sweet and bitter. “That’s why he noticed me. He was...impressed.” He didn’t need to say who *he* was.

Kakashi rested a hand on his arm. “He is not coming back, Iruka. We know what he is now, and he won’t risk coming within a hundred miles of Konoha if he can help it. My guess is he’ll have left the country or be well on his way to leaving. You’re safe here.”

When he spoke like that – said such stupid things so confidently – it was easier to remember that he wasn’t just Kakashi, he was also Hound. Iruka scowled up at him.

“You thought I was safe before. He was kidnapping kids right under ANBU’s noses and none of you did anything!”

It was Kakashi’s turn to look away.

“You’re right,” he said, and the words came out stiffly as though he wasn’t used to admitting he was wrong. “We should have been paying more attention. Should have looked into things more.”

“Why didn’t you?”

Kakashi leaned back on his hands and sighed. “This past year has been...difficult. We’ve had so much work to do. Too much. ANBU’s been stretched as thin as it can go trying to get the village back to normal. A lot of things have been going on that you wouldn’t know about, but...that isn’t an excuse. It was just easier to assume the kids had run away, and no one was asking us to look for them. Except you.”

“And why bother listening to me?” Iruka asked bitterly. He picked up a wooden block with a bright red letter A painted on one side, turning it over in his hands.

“If it makes you feel any better, Sandaime-sama was pretty angry when he heard you’d try to tell us,” Kakashi mumbled. “I’m not exactly in his good books right now.”

It was still difficult to reconcile the idea that Hound and Kakashi were the same person, and so the image of Sandaime yelling at Hound made Iruka feel smugly vindicated even as he felt a wave of sympathy for Kakashi.

“He gets over stuff pretty quickly,” he offered.

“I think your pranks and my mistakes are on a very different level,” Kakashi said. “But things are going to change now. I promise you, things will be better.”

Iruka snorted. “Unless there’s another kid-killing psycho in the village then it’s hard to see how they could get worse.”

“I mean it,” Kakashi insisted. “I know you were unhappy before. You’re still unhappy. Before you ran off up the mountain, I said I’d try to sort out your allowance, and I’m still trying. I’ve been asking about Mizuki as well, about why he isn’t part of a proper genin team, but it’s been difficult to get any answers. Every time I think I’ve found the right person to talk to, they assure me that I should be speaking to someone else entirely. I’ve been bounced around so much I’m not convinced anyone knows whose job it is.”

“Tell me about it,” Iruka muttered. This was old news. It was astonishing that Kakashi was only just discovering how chaotically the village was run.

“I’ll keep trying,” Kakashi said firmly. “We’ll figure it out, don’t worry. And in the meantime, if you need anything, you can ask me.” He turned away. “I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you before – not just about the kids. I thought I was already looking out for you, that I knew what was best for you and I was wrong. But I’m listening now.”

He sounded so sincere. Iruka wanted to believe him. He’d dreamt of this moment, of someone looking at him and seeing a boy who needed to be saved. It wasn’t what shinobi were meant to want – they were supposed to save themselves – but after everything he’d been through, everything he’d done to try and save Mizuki, Anko, the other children, wasn’t he owed at least that much?

“And if you still want to follow me home, you don’t need to do it from the shadows ten paces back,” Kakashi added, and Iruka flushed all over again. “I don’t know if I’m really the best company, but you’re welcome to come see me whenever you want to.” For the first time he sounded slightly stilted, as though expecting Iruka to say no.

“Even if I build traps in your back yard?” Iruka asked, trying to will his cheeks back to their normal colour. Kakashi flashed him a smile that

even through the mask seemed unusually shy and awkward, and Iruka lost the battle with his blush.

“As long as you don’t expect me to fall for the same trick twice,” Kakashi said.

A silence fell between them, broken only by the noises Naruto made as he played with his toys. It wasn’t entirely comfortable but there was the promise of future comfort if they’d only let themselves grow used to each other. Iruka was nobody’s fool, and he knew there would be no drastic changes in his life, or at least not any time soon. He would still be hungry and he would still be angry and he would still wake suddenly in the night with tears on his cheeks. But for the first time in a very long while, he’d wanted something and received it. It had been hard won, and he may yet lose it, but there was another person by his side who had promised to keep his head above the water, and that might sound like a very small thing but it was the few inches between breathing and drowning.

For the first time in a very long while, Iruka dared to hope.

A teddy bear hit him on the knee and Iruka blinked up to see Naruto watching him and giggling. Kakashi sighed and pulled Naruto onto his lap.

“Don’t throw things, Naruto,” he scolded gently.

“Why are you babysitting?” Iruka blurted out, unable to restrain his curiosity any longer. “Who *is* this kid?”

“He’s my sensei’s son,” Kakashi said, bouncing Naruto on his knee until the boy squealed happily. “I look after him sometimes, when I can.”

“Your sensei...?” Iruka’s eyes widened as he realised what that meant. “You mean he’s Yondaime-sama’s son?”



Kakashi glanced at him. "I'm sure you've heard plenty of stories about him," he said, with a note of warning in his voice. "And some will be true and some won't, and maybe one day I'll tell you which is which. But all you need to know for now is that Naruto is the closest thing to family I have, and if you want to come into my house, you need to respect that."

Iruka stared at the smiling toddler on his lap. "I've learnt a few things recently about stories," he said.

"Story!" Naruto cried. He lifted his hands to Kakashi. "Story time, story time!"

Kakashi sent Iruka an apologetic look. "Do you mind? He won't shut up unless I tell him one."

"Sure." Iruka shifted, making himself more comfortable. He expected Kakashi to reach for one of the books, but instead he only rearranged Naruto in his lap and paused thoughtfully.

Somewhere outside, the wind chime tinkled again in the breeze. There was a hush while Kakashi thought, and the quiet of the Hatake compound was no longer the silence of emptiness but instead the peaceful lull three people made before one of them spoke. Iruka let his body relax, and when Kakashi started his story, his voice was warm and soft and something Iruka could get used to.

"Once upon a time and not long ago, there was a boy who built traps for gods..."

## Chapter End Notes

Well this story ended up four times longer than I expected it to be. Funny how that always seems to happen. Thanks to the mods who organised the kakairu minibang event - there are some amazing stories in the event collection and I encourage everyone to go take a browse through the fics there if you haven't already.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!